

To the Angelbeast

For Arthur Russell

All that glitters isn't music.

Once, hidden in tall grass,
I tossed fistfuls of dirt into the air:
doe after doe of leaping.

You said it was nothing
but a trick of the light. Gold
curves. Gold scarves.

Am I not your animal?

You'd wait in the orchard for hours
to watch a deer
break from the shadows.

You said it was like lifting a cello
out of its black case.

Eduardo C. Corral

¹ Eduardo C. Corral, "[To the Angelbeast](#)," in [Poetry](#), collected in [Slow Lightning](#), [Yale](#)

Age of Beauty

This is not an age of beauty,
I say to the Rite-Aid as I pass a knee-high plastic witch
whose speaker-box laugh is tripped by my calf
breaking the invisible line cast by her motion
sensor. My heart believes it is a muscle

of love, so how do I tell it it is a muscle of blood?

This morning, I found myself
awake before my alarm & felt I'd been betrayed

by someone. My sleep is as thin as a paper bill
backed by black bars of coal that iridesce
indigo in the federal reserve of

dreams. Look, I said to the horse's
head I saw severed & then set on the ground, the soft
tissue of the cheek & crown cleaved with a necropsy
knife until the skull was visible. You look more
horse than the horses

with names & quilted coats in the pasture, grazing unbothered

by your body in pieces, steaming

against the drizzle. You once had a name
that filled your ears like amphitheaters,
that caused an electrical

spark to bead to your brain. My grief was born
in the wrong time, my grief an old soul, grief re-
incarnate. My grief, once a black-winged

beetle. How I find every excuse to indulge it, like a child
given quarters. In the restaurant, eating alone,

instead of interrogating my own
solitude, I'm nearly undone by the old
woman on her own. The window so filthy,

it won't even reflect her face, which must not be the same
face she sees when she dreams

of herself in the third person.

Emilia Phillips

Essay on Terry Pratchett (A Corollary)

It is widely acknowledged that there are two kinds of writers: the living / and the dead.

This is false.

Given time, a writer will always die.

Once dead, they will spend infinitely more time dead / than they did alive.

A living writer is therefore only infinitesimally alive.

In other words, they're already / dead.

Since dead writers are dead / and living writers are also

dead / all writers are dead.

To write is therefore to die.

But you the reader because / you are the reader are always / alive.

If you die you are by definition not a reader.

This is the immortality afforded by literature.

It is not given to the writer, as so many writers have wrongly supposed.

It is given to the reader, and then only so long as they are a reader:

it will not prevent somebody who has been a reader from dying.

But while you are a reader you are deathless

because you are reading. Be kind, then, reader:

you are alive / because I am dead.

Sam Cha

³ Sam Cha, "[Essay on Terry Pratchett \(A Corollary\)](#)," in [Boston Review](#)

Space Chimp Lives!

Also known as Ham the Chimp or Ham the Astrochimp, he was the first hominid launched into space, and this is how I think of myself, most days, the canary who keeps on breathing. That's not a fine enough point. Here, the thing is that home is the process of finding yourself at home, how the destination is the process, there's no place to get to, there's only the getting to a place. The fact that the Space Chimp lives isn't the point, but that we are the Space Chimp. Fat lot of good that does the Space Chimp, who also had a real life and then died about the time I was born. Context is everything. Today I read how someone at a museum dropped a pair of glasses on the floor in a gallery, facing out, near the wall, and people started to gather around it and take pictures. Space Chimp Lives. Don't get me wrong, I also don't know what to say in desperate moments, when you're sharing your devastation and pain. I'm very sorry for your loss. That's what we do, along with a little cute picture of a crying face, downcast with one little tear. How can this be anything other than an offense? The Space Chimp lives, when it wasn't expected to happen. It wasn't expected not to happen either. Maybe a 60/40 thing, being the first hominid shot into space. Like the first person to try putting cinnamon in red sauce. The answer is yes, where life itself is more a spilling of marbles across a floor. Say, for instance, you've just been strapped into a tight bucket seat and shot into space, and you think of the "Hell in a handbasket" line, and you break out laughing. Well, there you go, comic genius. And we break out that song where we're going to where the water tastes like wine.

John Gallaher

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⁴ John Gallaher, "[Space Chimp Lives!](#)" in [boat](#)

Arrivals

After sex sometimes, there is blood on the sheets

bright ciphers

The hush of the plane. How slow it feels

this coming-to-earth

These masks falling from above not meant to save us

Your beauty no shelter
Your word no shelter

To consider: I loved a hive of light
To consider: I came when he bit my palm

For while, we denied everything our therapists said—it was a good way
of being together.

A hand on mine in the dark in the dark in the dark

In the airport, trembling back to wonder if the oven is on.
How a hand curls a little in sleep;

the instinct to cup a hand around any flame

Sophie Klahr

⁵ [Sophie Klahr](#), "[Arrivals](#)," collected in [Meet Me Here at Dawn](#), [Yes Yes](#)

Dead Year

Frantic in the present
I sit in a cardboard box
until my fever breaks.
The clothes I wore
with you I keep together
in the closet as if
they form some communion
in the dark. This is the year
of seven new years
and I want to celebrate
my independence
by redacting Oklahoma
from every map.
I am mostly okay.
My husband is not
a monster and still
I am dumbstruck,
endlessly pick
fights to see how far
I can push. I bathe
each day in my
electrocuting shower
and every time
come out clean.

Anne Cecelia Holmes

⁶ [Anne Cecelia Holmes](#), "[Frantic in the present...](#)" collected in [Dead Year](#), [Sixth Finch](#)

Manhattan is a Lenape Word
from the ACE Hotel, Midtown

It is December, and we must be brave.

The ambulance's rose of light
blooming against the window.
Its single siren-call: *Help me.*
A silk-red shadow moving like water
through the orchard of her thigh.

Her, come—in the green night, a lion.
I sleep her bees with my mouth of smoke,
dip honey with my hands sweetened
on the dark and hive of her breast.
Out of the eater I eat. Meaning,
She is mine, colony.

The things I know aren't always easy.
I'm the only Native American
on the 8th floor of this hotel or any,
looking out any window
of a turn-of-the-century building
in Manhattan. *Manhattan* is
A Lenape word.

Even a watch must be wound.
How can a century or a heart turn
if nobody asks, *Where have all*
The natives gone?

If you are where you are, then where
are those who are not here? Not here.
Which is why in this city I have
many lovers. All my loves
are reparations loves.

What is loneliness if not unimaginable
light and measured in lumens—
an electric bill which must be paid,
A taxi cab floating across three lanes
with its lamp lit, gold in wanting.
At 2 a.m. everyone in New York City
is empty and asking for someone.

Again, the siren's same wide note:
Help me. Meaning, *I have a gift*
and it is my body, made two-handed
of gods and bronze.

She says, *You make me feel
like lightning*. I say, *I don't ever
want to make you feel that white*.
It's too late—I can't stop seeing
her bones. I'm counting the carpals,
metacarpals of her hand
when she is inside me.

One bone, the lunate bone, is named
for its crescent outline, lunatas, luna.
Some night she rises like that in me,
like trouble—a slow, luminous flux.

The moon beckons the lonely
coyote wandering West 29th Street
by offering its long wrist of light.
The coyote answers by lifting its head
and crying stars.

Somewhere far from New York City,
an American drone finds then loves
a body—the glowing nectar it seeks
through great darkness—makes
a candle-hour of it, and burns
gently along it, like American touch,
an unbearable heat.

The siren song returns in me,
I sing it to her throat: Am I
what I love? Is this the glittering world
I've been begging for?

Natalie Diaz

⁷ Natalie Diaz, "[Manhattan is a Lenape Word](#)," in [Lenny](#)

Clementines

What fun to wear nothing

but a daffodil around your hips
and sun yourself in red lipstick!
The blonde's legs long on the sand

like hypnotism. I dream of satin

castles growing on my chest.
My curls look green as sea glass
in the pinned-up ocean.

When Pop sends me

to retrieve a sweating bottle,
screws accuse from their bucket,
a saw grins across the wall.
On every side of the cellar,

Beauty is ambushed. How effortlessly

"Pen Pal" lifts her skirt with a letter opener
and never slips on the envelopes
from hundreds of admirers! Cool
length of a knife at her waist.

She twists, like the symbol for &.

Penmanship is practicable but is pretty?
One day I will not be the reflection
in Pop's trophy: all nose and no symmetry.
Mother shuffles on kitchen tiles, singing

"It's no good unless he loves you."

What if I spin myself in gauze
and terror too? The redhead's o-mouth
like a third eye catches me
pressing the beer to my hip.

Clementines peel easily

and everyone likes their smell.
Her cheeks pucker red and white,
the straw stopping her kiss.
The rind winds around her finger

and all the blossoms cower.

Shari Caplan

⁸ [Shari Caplan](#), "[Clementines](#)," collected in [Advice from a Siren](#), [Dancing Girl](#)

from “Ma Vie en Bling: A Memoir”

But I had been striking against geography for a very long time. Or rather, the systems I believed would end my loneliness amplified it, though I managed most days to feign delight in the wide expanses and simple clothing styles of my native land. These systems that amplified my loneliness included cars, airplanes, computers, and telephones. These systems included universities, literary presses, major American cities, the U.S. mail, and several private mail carriers including U.P.S. and Federal Express.

All my breathing apparatus rejected the air around me as not fit for breath and storms turned streets into rivers. There was a city I didn’t always remember, and then once in it, I recalled it like all cities are recalled by birds.

There were gas lamps. There were dead sows full of living birds. I thought about the poet Marcia Nardi who wrote “as if there were no connection between my being stuck at the ribbon counter in Woolworth’s for eight hours a day at minimum hourly wage, and my inability to function as a poet.” I was melancholy and wrote defenses of my melancholy. I totally forgot to shop.

The anesthetizing influence of habit having ceased, I would begin to have thoughts, and feelings, and they were such sad things.

Anne Boyer

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⁹ Anne Boyer, “[But I had been striking against...](#)” collected in [Garments Against Women](#), [Ahsahta](#)

The Dog and Cat Circus

1. I was less than successful as a teenage calamity. Too much moping, not enough whiskey. Too much Morrissey, not enough conflagration. That was later, for a time. The conflagration, not the whiskey. (No taste for brown liquors.)

2.

There's a word about fear of a regular pattern of holes—the fear of a honeycomb, for example—*trypophobia*. What's the word for fear of holes in the narrative? For fear of lack of narrative? What's the word for not knowing if your memory is yours, for, “Did I imagine it, or did we try to make jello shots using the chilly crawl space of her attic bedroom as a refrigerator? Why would we do that?” Certainly the French have that word.

3.

It's dwindling down to discussions of sweaters and chill, of embarrassing pains and, like, whether the root vegetables taste fresh. By “it,” I mean “all of it.” Beckett did the dwindling better.

4.

Limerence is also a word. A person from 1979 coined it. Limerence is obsessively wanting your eros reciprocated. Limerence is not to be confused with liminality, but when I think of writing a novel, I think my only interesting plots are limerence and liminality.

Conflagration and drift. An oarless boat on fire.

5.

“Why does the dog need so much love?” is what I once asked my mother. “We all do,” is what my mother said back.

We all want the Taj Mahal. If we're lucky, we get 1000 square feet and a dishwasher.

6.

The moon. Someone once called on his night away to tell me to look at the moon.

7.

I have drifted from conflagration to moony, dog-like love. As I am wont to do. Someone must have a word for that. It may be a word in one of those languages with only 14 speakers left.

Joanna Penn Cooper

from *The Family Arcana*

The telephone rings. We have a telephone? Mother finds it under the kindling. Hello? Hello? It's Grandmother. She's lost. She says there are tiny huts. She says: Clouds! Rain coming! She says: Tractor people! We go to the usual place, the unusual places, a few other places. Tiny huts? Tractor people? The skies are perfectly clear. Back home Grandmother is alone at the table. She wants to know if there will be creamed turnips with dinner.

Jedediah Berry

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¹¹ [Jedediah Berry](#), "[The telephone rings...](#)" collected in [The Family Arcana](#), [Ninepin](#)

Instructions for Making Salsa Verde

For days the fireflies have been eating my darkness
without gaining weight.
Disappointment is always buy one,
get two free if you have the appetite.
I have avocado pits
and I lick their swollen faces before I crush them open
with the flat of the big knife.
Study the fireflies, how they turn away
when the wind smells too much of rye.
Study anger in the bathroom mirror.
A rock looks at salt and shivers,
because it doesn't know if salt is a memory
or a promise. Find a recipe for that.

Adriana Cloud

¹² [Adriana Cloud](#), "[Instructions for Making Salsa Verde](#)," *Noble / Gas Qtrly*, collected in *Instructions for Building a Wind Chime*, Poetry Society of America

C'est La Guerre

If I see one more shred of pink rust come peeling off the face of this warehouse tonight.
With my bouquet of railroad ties that I plucked from the Union Pacific who'll witness me.
When I've found the man who named the road on which you grew up and defaced him.
And wearing his father's crushed suit and his cufflinks I fire your name in his furrows.
When I've poured his mother a whiskey and coffee and beer-back I'll learn her our myth.
We come from low country with deer ticks in our blood is that what they're selling.
In search of the black horse who spits on the hay and the barley and hunger strikes.
Who lost the blue horse he loved and he'll die with his eye on the wood where she fell.
I fire your name in the furrows tonight for the ones who refuse to survive themselves.
Who say every five seconds the nations of dead they tell me my job is assuage them.
And every five seconds when I tear out their stitches I tear them out five seconds long.
It is you with the planks of rotting down barns in your arms I am barreling toward.
It is you from the jackshit connivances of yesterday's scofflaw patrol I will kidnap.
And who will say amen if I fell one more empire that was raised from a handful of litter.
And who will help quit our mothers who will not quit treading the rafters of savagery.
And who will carry our fathers from the ditches where they crashed their radio flyers.
With a bouquet of railroad ties in a crushed suit I will field you this question come winter.
In the apocryphal gossip of sea kings my face is scrimshaw like they've never witnessed.
He sunk himself like a dreadnaught into the sea to landmark her joy is that what they say.
And who will witness me if I'm one page in a long book of ways to say no with no ending.
And if I come to your door come winter in crushed suit with the stitches to prove you.

Danniel Schoonebeek

The Parade

The parade will feature red dragons,
drums, sixty horses
and a sharpshooter in kimono.

Children will receive small flags to wave.
Women will receive small children to clutch.
You may note we offer five varieties

of yellow ribbon.
You may note we've drained the gunpowder
from your firecrackers.

Look at how the cherry blossoms
squawk and circle
before sinking their pink talons

into the monuments.
The monuments play dead.
They are fleshy with granite.

Think of these barricades as an embrace
of concrete. Look—
how your country longs to hold you.

Sandra Beasley

¹⁴ [Sandra Beasley](#), "[The Parade](#)," in [Blackbird](#), collected in [I Was the Jukebox](#), [Norton](#)

from *Diving Makes the Water Deep*

Or with Steve on a slow sweaty train. Hours in, for the absurdity of further heat (one answer to being trapped in heat), we moved to an improbable plexiglass compartment. Sealed ourselves in. Smoked the cigarettes old men smoke, drank hot white wine, traded clothes with some Germans. An Italian puppeteer in a trench coat joined. He and I were in a heated agreement about the necessity of chaos in art, especially in landscape, especially in regions of historic dairy production. Until I realized he wasn't saying "chaos" but "cows." Ten years ago.

Zach Savich

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¹⁵ [Zach Savich](#), "[Or with Steve on a slow sweaty train...](#)" collected in [Diving Makes the Water Deep](#), [Rescue Press](#)

Elections have consequences
and confetti on one side, not the other

Suddenly I'm surrounded by republicans.
The president. Congress. The senate.
Three quarters of the governors
and state legislatures are red.
I kissed my wife last night
and she tasted like Richard Nixon.
The country's more republican
than I am Bob. I'm all Bob
in one sense, but in another,
I'm half Virginia and half Hershel,
so the math checks out. So what becomes
of checks and balances now?
Imagine asking yourself,
Do you think my ideas are brilliant
or merely inspired?
Republicans will be able to drill
for oil in my bedroom if they want.
Who'll stop them—me? Marcel Marceau?
Buddha? That guy's too chubby
and fictitious. But now they've done it—

the poets are mad. This means
the painters are furious
at having to listen to the poets.
Soon people who sell art supplies
will be livid that the painters
spend so much time hiding from the poets
and not painting color field portraits
of nudes. But how do you paint
a color field portrait of a nude?
O look—I just got distracted
by my own poem. I begin to understand
why liberals are out of power.
Republicans don't wonder
how to paint color field portraits
of nudes. They recognize
a trick question when they are one.
They see the chance to tell women
what to do with their babies
and take it. They know it's finally time
to give the long-suffering rich
the hand-job of a tax break. But what

am I really saying?
I guess that I'm at a loss
for a rudder, as it requires
first and foremost a boat,
and I am what technically
is referred to as drowning. Or this
isn't over by any means necessary
measures will be taken as a whole
the center will not hold me closer
tiny dancer in the dark-
ness falls on those who don't
check their flashlight batteries
first, everyone check
your flashlight batteries first
and then repeat after me—
America is the greatest
and messiest country
because whoever wants to be
one of us gets to be
on the team. Did I just say
suck your left-leaning thumb
one more week and then
get back to work? No,
I did not. Two days, tops.

Bob Hicok

¹⁶ Bob Hicok, "[Elections Have Consequences and Confetti on One Side, not the Other](#)," in [diode](#)

An Obituary

The way she leaned a chair.
The manner in which she danced
At her father's funeral. The club
Sandwich she spent ninety days
In jail for. Did anyone ever ask her
How she felt about the falling asleep
And waking up routine? –
Then the way her piss turned dark yellow.
Her children moved out
And SVEDKA moved in. Clumps
of her golden hair in the shower drain.
By summer she looked like winter.
By winter she was nearly invisible. –
A broom stood on a front porch.
A floor lamp ate its dinner to the blues.
The way she took on the shape
of a dehydrated fig tree.
The manner in which her teeth leapt
When she talked about grace.

Jeffrey Allen

¹⁷ Jeffrey Allen, "[An Obituary](#)," in [The Laurel Review](#)

from *IRL*

Being sprayed
on like roaches by cap-
italism, by metabolic dis-
ease, by team sports names,
mascots, by general invisibility
of being a function of the
past, being a feature
of the land By forced Indian
boarding schools with
20% mortality rates—
By the English fucking
language with its high
beams in my face I'm
totally caught
off guard when Muse
texts me *don't respond*
don't respond don't
respond don't spondee
respond don't respond
Then text five things in a
row and fucking kill myself.
I mean my phone. Delete
Facebook because okay just
because in general just bc
you hate yourself
doesn't mean yr allowed
to be an asshole. Stop
fucking posting about
Klonopin, or cutting yourself,
or throwing up—Save it
for a shitty poem like a normal
wretch. Boundaries
aren't cages.

Tommy Pico

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¹⁸ Tommy Pico, "[Being sprayed on like roaches...](#)" collected in [IRL](#), [Birds](#)

from *Beneath the Ice Fish Like Souls Look Alike*

No children exist after midnight.

The keyholes rest their eyes.

A green apple on the sill kneels to its rottenness.

Snow angels like fallout hiss....

. . . .

The mannequin crosses her arms by dropping them.
The leather boot remembers how to be skin.

The mannequin envies the photograph its light.
The boot remembers life as a dark heat inside.

. . . .

A baby grand's gutted to make a bed.

A cigarette's stubbed out in the barrel of a .38 held to a head.

A domino is on middle C reminds those who've forgotten how to play.

A moth in the starless day undresses

mannequin

. . . .

A snake coils in the empty toilet.

The moon is nothing but the moon.

The telephone rings once.

The telephone rings twice.

Emilia Phillips

The President's Dreams

I wake up and watch the president
walking his dog on TV,
so joyful and dangerous,
like a small child
building his first fire.
Downstairs Catullus sits
at the kitchen table.
He opens a letter with a sparrow.
He pours the filings of his heart
into the dregs of his coffee. He scrapes
his scorched toast clean
with a knife. What do you think?
I say to my students,
is there only toppling?
Last week, eleven men drowned
in the president's dreams.
Now there is talk
of banning his dreams, of planting flowers
in the gun barrels
of his dreams. Hey man,
he says to his advisors, that
is beautiful. Now the police stand
on each other's shoulders
so they can peer into my heart,
while Catullus writes
the body is a trapdoor
that the soul falls through
on the sticky side of a yellow
Post-it note. Today the president
wakes up and walks his dog
and claims suburban Texas
as an ally of the Axis
of Beauty. Catullus pours his heart
down the sink, since you must choose,
he thinks, between the heart
and the mind. Having both, he thinks,
you'll never survive.
He says the word Texas
to himself, slowly, many times.

Gregory Lawless

²⁰ [Gregory Lawless](#), "[The President's Dreams](#)," collected in [I Thought I Was New Here](#), [BlazeVOX](#)

What we're talking about here

is brief:

an end to these machinations; an age of iron and rust.

Perhaps, more accurately, iron then rust.

The invariable oxygenation. The cause/adverb/effect.

A side note: luminous is something to do with light.

This is only your first clue. The title of Consul and the verb console

are not even distantly related etymologically. Keep in mind
it's the Latin *com* plus *solari*: to comfort.

The *m* becomes an *n* because _____.

If you go back far enough,
you'll find words are chiseled in stone.

If you go back far enough, you'll find stone.

Roman history is a series of formal dinners. Gaul
seems to be the broken saucer in the dishwasher.

As this is ancient times, remember the dishwasher is an actual person.

Olives are inedible without first soaking
for seven days in poison. This is your second clue.

Eventually, Aurelius found that the problem
with his son Commodus was he never listened.

Also problematic was his desire to bind men
to poles and chew their testicles off.

I am the lion, he would say to the crowds,
ignoring their shouts for him to act the part of the hero

Hercules, this great son of Zeus,
clad in lion's skin during his long labors.

I tire of pretending. I will show you even your skin is costume.

Matthew Minicucci

²¹ Matthew Minicucci, "[What We're Talking About Here](#)," in [Kenyon Review](#), collected in [Translation](#), [Kent State](#)

White Noise

The sound of the self, or the self's deletion?
Like wind tossing leaves of aluminum foil,
Sun-babble cooling in swirls of moon dust.
A sterilized music, a soothing unreason.

* * *

An atomized god, or a god's accretion?
The mind's swimming laps in Styrofoam peanuts,
In the latest decrees from the caucus of cretins.
Like birdsong in nightmare. The boiling of seas.

* * *

That sandpaper rasping of grief on grief:
Lobotomy's soundtrack, the curdle of semen.
We've amplified fog and made audible bleach.
The sound of our names in the dialect of demons.

George David Clark

²² [George David Clark](#), "[White Noise](#)," [Poem of the Week](#), collected in [Reveille](#), [University of Arkansas](#)

Banana Palace

I want you to know
how it felt to hold it,
 deep in the well of my eye.

You, future person: star of one of my
complicated dooms —

This one's called Back to the Dark.

Scene 1: Death stampedes through the server-cities.

Somehow we all end up living in caves, foraging in civic ruin.

Banana Palace — the last
 of the last of my kind who can read
 breathes it hot
 into your doom-rimed ear.

She's a dowsers of spine-broken books and loose paper
the rest of your famishing band thinks mad.

•

Mine was the era
of spending your time
 in town squares made out of air.

You invented a face
 and moved it around, visited briefly

 with other faces.

Thus we streamed
down lit screens

sharing pictures of animals looking ridiculous —

trading portals to shoes, love, songs, news, somebody's latest

 rabid cause: bosses, gluten, bacon, God —

Information about information was the pollen we
deposited —

while in the real fields bees starved.

Into this noise sailed
Banana Palace.

•

It was a mother ship of gold.

Shining out between HAPPY BDAY KATIE!
and a photo of someone's broken toe —

Like luminous pillows cocked on a hinge,
like a house
with a heavy lid, a round house of platelets and honey —

It was open,
like a box that holds a ring.

And inside, where the ring would be:

•

I think about you a lot, future person.

How you will need
all the books that were ever read
when the screens and wires go dumb.

Whatever you haven't used
for kindling or bedding.

Whatever made it through
the fuckcluster of bombs
we launched accidentally,

at the end of the era of feeling like no one
was doing a thing

about our complicated dooms —

Helpless and braced we sat in dark spaces

submerged in pools of projected images,
trying to disappear into light —

Light! There was so much light!

It was hard to sleep.

•

Anyway.

Banana Palace.

Even now when I say it, cymbals
shiver out in spheres. It starts to turn its
yellow gears

and opens like a clam. Revealing

a fetal curl on its temple floor,

bagged and sleeping —

a white cocoon

under lit strings that stretch

from floor to ceiling —

a harp made of glass

incubating

a covered

•

pearl —

We broke the world
you're living in,
future person.

Maybe
that was always our end:
to break the jungles to get at the sugar, leave behind
a waste of cane —

There came a time
I couldn't look at trees without
feeling elegiac — as if nature

were already *over*,
if you know what I mean.

It was the most glorious thing I had ever seen.

Cross-section of a banana under a microscope
the caption read.

I hunched around my little screen
sharing a fruit no one could eat.

Dana Levin

Love Is a Place from Which You Return

“The fact of others limits me” is one thought, that couples with “every chance is your last chance.” And I mean “I” when I say “you,” which is a helpful conceit. Every chance is that you’re not graceful or the miners were rough building their houses on the cliff face as you look up and are clumsy. We will all be miners then. We will burn our ships for fuel. We will turn gold to lead in our pockets trying to swim the river. What I mean to say is that all is well. All’s pretty good right now. The fire’s big and will last the night. What you were having was a bad dream, whether you look at me that way or the sky does. It goes on. It descends. I’m on your side. It’s an elegy to my friend who died or to myself, younger. It descends along the escarpment until its descent starts to feel like floating or like a bunch of kids in a classroom raising their hands and saying “yes.” The figures there are floating too, between their caves of light. Normally I’d stop there. Stop writing or talking to you, I mean. They’re having their evening meal. I’d want that to close things out, a series of families mock fighting and laughing. There’s always more to say, though, and I’ll never get to it all. Even if I could, I couldn’t. The fact of others rises around me like two hands. They made it into a TV commercial, but once someone meant it, over a fire, orange in the glow. Two floating hands from the darkness. The fact of others couples them to the future. What they hand to you is that there will always be more to say. And a lot of it will be wrong and a lot of it will be right, or feel right, as you’re sick of goodbyes at some point. Well aren’t we all. You will perhaps say history leads somewhere then, meaning you want where you are to be somewhere, and this certainly feels like somewhere, right now. The trail’s narrow along the remote architectural features. Everyone and everything is possibly dangerous, delicate, and the shadows of your imagination paved with quartz and shards of pottery. They long ago departed, 1,000 years maybe. I would tell them anything if they would only ask, but they never ask. I always thought you were the most beautiful one. I always wanted to be beautiful like that, from these caves that don’t speak. These speaking caves that never speak. It’s why we call them that, “caves,” or “the past,” or “love,” because we stand outside in the sun, calling to them. I was caught up in the moment. And no one knows me better than this.

John Gallaher

²⁴ John Gallaher, “[Love is a Place from Which You Return](#),” in [decomP](#)

Self-Portrait in a Tanning Bed

It's February & I am the only black
girl at Future Tan Tanning
Salon I laugh when I enter
my private room & see an African
mask above the clothes racks I am
getting tired of irony naked
climbing onto the plexiglass &
hearing it creak I wonder like any
other moment alone what if I die
like this what if the plastic gives
& torched by two dozen ultra
violet glass rods I gently close
the canopy of the Sun Capsule Super
Cyclone 350 wrapped in its purple
cylinders of light I can see myself
reflected back with tiny goggles at first
I think I look like a reverse coon with huge
black eyes but I like the way I look
darker & like a time-traveler how
my breasts must sometimes appear
like this to my lover I think I'm sad
or something worry how much time
has passed since I've been here

Rio Machete Cortez

²⁵ [Rio Machete Cortez](#), "[Self-Portrait in a Tanning Bed](#)," in [Poets House](#), collected in [I have learned to define a field as a space between mountains](#), Jai-Alai Books

On the Uncertainty of Our Judgment

Oil darkens the river upstream. Another spill, another assurance from our mayor that the water is fine. He drinks a glass of it for the press, their cameras swallow it up. But *purely as a precautionary measure*, he's shut down the river water intakes, let the city draw from its reservoirs—or someone has, some water works worker, I imagine, in a grey jumpsuit,

two days' growth of hair on his pale face, stinking of loneliness. Everything remains the same since Monday's spill, my breasts leaking milk onto my sheets, onto the face of my half-lidded baby when I jerk myself awake, asleep, awake, up on my bare feet in the bathroom where the toilet leaks, smells faintly of piss, but in my stupor I keep stepping into puddles,

forgetting, distracted, my baby already (I can hear him) stirring. I turn on the faucet. Somewhere deep beneath my house, old lead service lines pull the water up to me, where it burns over my hands. White lead, as described in Alexipharmaca of Nicander: *gleaming, deadly, whose fresh colour is like milk, which foams all over*. That slight sting my nipples make

before the let down begins, but my baby is sleeping. Is he sleeping? Maybe he's just calm, waiting to open his eyes, little planet. Last night's storm has escaped his gaping mouth. The fists he shook at the walls are limp now, would slip easily over the rail of his crib like a tiny bow, rise with the music in his dreams, which swell and turn—dark clouds beneath his lids No one knows how far the spill has traveled since it entered the river, if the water has already sluiced the fuel downstream into our pipelines. But we have assurances. *What's important here is to recover our losses*, says the mayor, meaning *the oil*, which he has ordered the Coast Guard to vacuum out of the water so it might still be bought and sold. This is a value system

not much different from Greece of 15 BC, when Vitruvius wrote about the dangers of commonplace poison. He described the lead workers as having *a pallid colour; the fumes from daily casting destroyed the vigour of the blood*. But lead was abundant, malleable, with a low melting point—it was easy everywhere. So the ancients used it to shape and solder pipes, sweeten sour wine,

line their aqueducts, transport live fish in tanks made from it, knowing its effect on the body. At this hour, there's almost silence: the metronome of the mechanical swing rocking my boy, the throated note he suckles down. Why do I imagine that water works worker to be lonely? Perhaps he's walking toward the valve intake now, imagining applause, whistling a jaunty tune,

inexplicably happy in the black morning while I hum my boy archaic lullabies, wondering if a mother's body can filter out bad water, make it sweet. I may be going mad from lack of sleep. Or perhaps it's lead in the blood—Saturnism, after the planet god, who orbited slowly, but erupted in violence or revelry. I'm trying to teach my son a wariness I don't abide by—the wound

just sutured shut beneath my belly where he was lifted out of me, chord noosed around his neck, into a surgical room, the lights tined around us, silver instruments, physicians spiraling, the shouting, making their assurances. When I asked what was wrong, they set my shivering newborn on my chest as if he were an answer. Should I wake him now, press

a burning nipple into his mouth, let him drain my aching breast? From outside a light brightens then seeps from his face. *It will pass*, the mayor says in every conference with the press. *It will pass*. Rising toward my son sleeping beneath the window, I feel dizzy, brace myself against the pane, my hand on the glass, wondering how hard I'd have to press to break through.

Danielle Cadena Deulen

²⁶ [Danielle Cadena Deulen](#), "[On the Uncertainty of Our Judgment](#)," collected in [Our Emotions Get Carried Away Beyond Us, Barrow Street](#)

I was the show-off
the pretender the crooner (no
that was you) the rowdy the war-
monger (who was the peace-monger)
I was the frozen game (you were
in the melt-down in forward) You were
the exhibitionist on top of the bus
flashing your mickey mouse you
were the concerned grandpapa you
were the poverty I was the mentality
I was the paucity Our
roles had changed
We were the courier of lilies of zombies
you'd want to dress up
and introduce your kids to
We were the flesh and the wax
We were the star's cicatrix

We were the bouquet with every favorite flower in us in
the general proportion o to be changed again and hanging
forth from the throats Our passionately lost life

Valerie Hsiung

Tell You

To the closeness of you, I give up my body
You are well-rested
Here I am older than you

I will tell you something
I am a night person, medicated
in your bed We live alone

in a public place and have deceived each other
I want to pay for my crimes
I am waiting to be turned into nightingale

So many men take your face now
I am excommunicated
You have simply loved me

too long Understand
I am fucking Salinger as often as you
I want to be looked in the eyes

Valerie Duff

Tiara

Peter died in a paper tiara
cut from a book of princess paper dolls;
he loved royalty, sashes

and jewels. I don't know,
he said, when he woke in the hospice,
I was watching the Bette Davis film festival

on Channel 57 and then—
At the wake, the tension broke
when someone guessed

the casket closed because
he was in there in a big wig
and heels, and someone said,

You know he's always late,
he probably isn't here yet—
he's still fixing his makeup.

And someone said he asked for it.
Asked for it—
when all he did was go down

into the salt tide
of wanting as much as he wanted,
giving himself over so drunk

or stoned it almost didn't matter who,
though they were beautiful,
stampeding into him in the simple,

ravishing music of their hurry.
I think heaven is perfect stasis
poised over the realms of desire,

where dreaming and waking men lie
on the grass while wet horses
roam among them, huge fragments

of the music we die into
in the body's paradise.
Sometimes we wake not knowing

how we came to lie here,
or who has crowned us with these temporary,
precious stones. And given

the world's perfectly turned shoulders,
the deep hollows blued by longing,
given the irreplaceable silk

of horses rippling in orchards,
fruit thundering and chiming down,
given the ordinary marvels of form

and gravity, what could he do,
what could any of us ever do
but ask for it.

Mark Doty

²⁹ Mark Doty, "[Tiara](#)," collected in [Poets for Life: Seventy-Six Poets Respond to AIDS](#), [Persea](#)

from *Please Bury Me in This*

As if death was a place and the dream was rectangular.

On the wall near the window, my father wrote and underlined, *The crows are Nazis in disguise*.

After he died, I hung his blue paintings in my room to remember his mind.

Now I can see through the wall to the sky.

~

I have seen my own breath in the cold.

I have seen my own death, Anna Rontgen said holding the first X-ray ever taken—

Her left hand: the bones of her fingers, her wedding ring.

Maybe lifting the veil from the bride's face is the beginning of language.

I miss you, or I think about your skin before I fall asleep.

In the postcard I keep of a field in winter, a child's head is tilted back, her mouth open to snow.

The awe is held still, says *oh* and *oh* and *oh*.

~

Paper of the body, I pray, the mind.

Instead of stillness, as I close my eyes, I want to rip this page into confetti, throw it in the air.

I want my mouth close to your ear.

Even just the word *surprise*.

~

Looking down at the floor afterward, my black heels.

Take them off, I think—two open, empty mouths.

I want to tell you something memorable, something you could wear around your neck.

Once a woman next to me on a train whispered, If I could just cut my head off and sit here.

I touched my neck, turned toward the view.

Like a string between the body and mind, my hand and neck reflected in the train window overlapping trees.

I see it too: a bouquet of knives where the head should be.

Allison Benis White

30

³⁰ [Allison Benis White](#), "[As if death was a place...](#)" collected in [Please Bury Me in This](#), [Four Way](#)

Mostly I Don't Want to Have a Son—

too many fears. What if he knows the ancients
believed more boys than girls were born in wartime,
to account for casualties in battle, leave
the world in balance? What if he cannot tell
whether or not it is wartime, whether or not
his purpose is mere replacement? What if he flees
to a field of ice, lucks into a research job
itemizing the stomach contents of terns,
inducing them to spit up their prey for science?
What if he makes a mistake and a bird falls ill,
and to spare pain, he must bludgeon her with a rock?
What if he forges his home on a reckless coast?
What if he has to kill her with his fist?
What if he then finds solace in superstition?
What if he won't breathe when passing a graveyard?
What if he doesn't realize so many are murdered
that graveyards run for miles? What if he goes blue,
endeavoring to avoid the breath of the dead?
What if he does not die but instead is damaged?
What if he must rely on the aid of a dog?
What if he does not care for the dog, and strikes it,
and leaves it out to swelter, and someone yells
I'D HATE TO SEE WHAT YOU WOULD DO TO A CHILD,
and runs off? I don't want to have a son.
A daughter is simpler. All she needs to learn
is neither to speed nor be caught, and if she is caught,
make him follow her to a parking lot,
somewhere bright and unclosing, before she cuts
the engine. Always ask to see a badge.

Natalie Shapero

³¹ [Natalie Shapero](#), "[Mostly I Don't Want to Have a Son—](#)" in [Typo](#), collected in [Hard Child](#), [Copper Canyon](#)

from “Read”

Read it again, we murmur, again. Read it. The shadow of the ax falls across the drawn shade of the window behind the bed as the room echoes with the fearsome words in which the deception is dropped: *The better to eat you with!* Though that charged Q& A remains important, we’ll always wish our heroine had said something like “What the fuck are *you* looking at!” or even just “As if!” Something tough, proving she’s no fool, she’s a survivor, even if it reminds us that she wasn’t brought up well—if she had to stay at all, if she had to speak. *Fuck you*, we imagine her scoffing (and we imagine ourselves cheering her on: say it), *you pathetic little shit*. And then everything should happen at once: the window’s glass crashing in, an ax swinging down, a spray of blood fanning up around the leering jaws and lolling tongue, and the glee in the wolf’s eyes extinguished. At last. Then Red, with a bad case of Stockholm syndrome and her lifetime membership in the Sierra Club, crying on the floor beside the body: “You... you could have just *trapped* him... you could’ve released him in [sniff] Wyoming or... something...” “Ah, my dear, my dear ...*this* breed,” Grandma gently laughs, stepping away from the podium, “is in no danger of going extinct!”

Laura Mullen

32

³² Laura Mullen, “[Read](#),” collected in [Complicated Grief](#), [Solid Objects](#)

In the First World

The moon is pink. Husks of cicada and hummingbird corpses litter the sidewalk. Our daughter plots a ceremony at her plastic table. She draws a picture for your grandmother who isn't dead. She whispers thank yous for tiny teddy bears, stolen from your other grandmother's bed. The one who is dead. She counts to seven and tells me I have stolen a letter from the alphabet; I have stolen the eight. Here, the people eat endless appetizers and die from sadness.

Amelia Martens

33

³³ [Amelia Martens](#), "[In the First World](#)," collected in [The Spoons In the Grass Are There to Dig a Moat](#), [Sarabande](#)

Instructions for Learning a Foreign Language

Most cruelty begins with loneliness.
The ways, the colors, how pain makes us a canvas.
If I wanted a name for every kind of ache,
I would need more words.
It begins with turning into
something I don't want to be.
My mother. A well.
When your girlfriend picks up
after the twelfth ring
I say the cruelest thing I can think of: my name.
Someone tried to hurt the sky too,
and the moon is a chipped fingernail.
Was it beautiful?
Only in the way that all endings are.

Adriana Cloud

34

³⁴ [Adriana Cloud](#), "[Instructions for Learning a Foreign Language](#)," collected in [Instructions for Building a Wind Chime](#), [Poetry Society of America](#)

from *Diving Makes the Water Deep*

71.

My course on The Literature of Longing would include the moment in Canto V of Dante's *Inferno* when the lovers abandon the pretense of reading ("That day we read no more") and the moment with a woman I met when I was sitting at a bar reading (she asked if I wanted some of the bread from her plate), who had a copy of the *Inferno* from the public library in her car, and I read her that passage, and then we read no more.

72.

Half an hour later, in the parking lot of an apartment complex (she'd taken me to see a tree she liked). A sudden battering. Woman at the windshield. Help I woke up he was hitting me he has a gun he's coming back. We stood with her for a long time under a tree, waiting for the police. Holding hands. The three of us.

Zach Savich

35

³⁵ Zach Savich, "[My course on the Literature of Longing...](#)" collected in [Diving Makes the Water Deep](#), [Rescue Press](#)

Note Found in a Copy of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

*Lesley says she's going to write ya
so I thought I'd say hello first!
I'm glad you two made up. You're a great great guy
and Lesley deserves the best. Well gotta go!
I love Jacob! Bye - Robyn.*

Judging by the abrupt disappearance
of highlighter, I'd guess
he gave up during Act Two. He? She?
Did Bryan leave it here,
or was it never delivered?

*Bryan,
I did want to do
what we did last night! I just felt sick
and like it would take all of my energy!
I did not do anything that I did not want to do!*

Through the windows of the library
the leaves shiver to the tune
of Max Bruch's Scottish Fantasy.
It all tastes of the jammy fingers
that last handled these headphones.

*Everything we did I wanted to happen!
You didn't make me do anything!
If I didn't want to do something
or didn't want you to do something
I would of said something to you about it!*

It's the moment when Helena pursues
Demetrius into the forest.
*Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike me,
Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave,
Unworthy as I am, to follow you.*

Evidence is emerging to suggest
that Shakespeare's plays
may have been written by a sexually liberal
daughter of Jewish musicians.
Bryan, I love you and I don't want you

to feel like you raped me! In the film,
they're on bicycles,
and Calista Flockhart, perhaps surprisingly,
holds her own.
I wonder if there's a cafeteria on this floor.

You DIDN'T so I wish you wouldn't feel that way!

Barbara Johnson has an exceptional essay
on the usage of the second person address
somewhere on these shelves.

I will not stay thy questions; let me go,

Or if thou follow me, do not believe

But I shall do thee mischief in the wood.
Finally, here comes the rain.

Even inside, the smell of hot pavement
gives the Reading Room an erotic humidity.

Have Akiko Suwanai's recordings
of the Fantasy sold better than others'
because of the cover photo of her, lounging
with her luscious hair raining down?
You are a pretentious patronizing dickwad.

*Well, I have to go now and pay
attention to Professor Roberts.*

I Love You W/All My Heart!

Her dotage now I do begin to pity.
Love Always, Lesley Anne Busch.

I could give this to Mike Roberts
who might call the police
or at least a student counsellor.
Not that it would change much.
Your wrongs do set a scandal on my sex.

How many wives have, on occasion,
just lain back and let their men
get it over with? Probably all of them.

How many men had the senses
to notice, and feel anger or guilt?

Fare thee well, nymph; ere he do leave this grove

*Thou shalt fly him,
and he shall seek thy love.*

And which would have been worse for them
losing the note, or having someone return it?

Akiko Suwanai tears through the final runs of the Fantasy,
her hands damp from the rain
that is peppering the library windows.

Bottom, with his ass-head,
gropes his way toward the spellbound queen.

Adam Sol

Ard Na Mara

Catherine and John said it meant beside the sea.

I thought it meant above,

because the house was above a pasture swooping down
to the tide, a thirty-foot drop.

You'd step through layers of grass and manure-smell
to the red, leathery weed splashed

across the rocks, and then looking up, you'd feel dwarfed
by the one wall left standing—

a fragment of Sweeney's castle—just a stone wing-blade,
but you got the idea: fortress,

and the fear of raids. Later when I first read the opening
of the *Agamemnon*, I thought

the Greek signal fires must have been lit on points like this,
the war won but not over,

the flames a signal to begin learning the next thing to dread.
The Dobbys long ago had turned

the hayloft into a room to let. There was a shred of linoleum,
a cot with spring, and a low sink,

the kind to bathe a baby in. Knives, forks, butane,
and windows on three walls.

A red door with a latch opened onto cement stairs leading
down to a toilet in the barn.

Me pissing with the cows, those enormous, contented breathers.
I spread a sleeping bag

on the cot and slept at an angle so I could look out to the point.
I had a Hermes Rocket to type on.

The war in Viet Nam still ongoing, but I was well out of it,
as far as I could get. I went in

to Donegal once a week for newspapers and wine gums.
For rent I helped John milk the cows

and tend to the hay all through the summer. In return
I got the earliest hours of the day,

and during storms, the whole afternoon free. I stayed put,
tried not to leave the farm.

I never saw the ruins of a chapel in the next pasture over,
and only now have I learned

that a sixth-century monk named Aedh had made his cell
in the crawlspace there.

Now there are metal roadside markers, and a guidebook
to his gravestone, an upright bolt

of granite, as tall as I am, rough-hewn, rounded, mossy,
and chiseled smooth in front.

At the top, like a halo, an incised, long-armed Maltese cross
in a wide circling rim, a sign,

the book says, of an art in transition, *the pagan monolith
crowned with Christian radiance.*

To the right and below the wheel is a three-sided Celtic knot—
symbol of the Trinity—a weave

that makes me imagine Aedh's bones, the arms and legs
folded neatly over one another.

I stand above him in the mid-day quiet and remember
how deeply I resented the cars

that sometimes sped by on their way west. I stirred as little
as I could, sought out no one.

I loved the sweet silence of hay as it cured, and the labor too,
the mowing and tossing,

letting grass breathe itself dry. Even the raucous, oily baler,
an old engine with flying ropes,

and compacting magic, dropping bales behind for me
to pick up and bring in

on the back of a tractor cart. I would heave them to the loft,
then climb bale upon bale

to wedge them into dusty corners, the weight of each
locking the other down.

I worked with single-minded intent, the way a calf
might plunge its nose into a milk pail.

I felt a little like the cows too, the way they knew exactly
where they belonged. They walked

themselves in from the field, did nothing but chew and stare
while I fiddled with the milking tubes.

Each summer night was a long prelude and a short darkness.
I would eat late and alone in my room—

scrambled eggs, rice. I could hear the pub in the village
warming up as I went to bed between

nine and ten. Sunlight would angle low into the room sometimes,
and I would feel vaguely visited,

though I could hardly say by what. My knuckles would ache,
and my breath would quicken,

as if I were late, or had to get somewhere in a hurry,
though I didn't know where.

I would lie in bed, eyes open, fingers behind my head.
Though I had nothing to worry about,

I worried. I would watch that light as it passed through
the window as if it had a mind of its own.

It would reach across my room out to the field and trees
that stood between me and Aedh

and his grave. In the morning I woke before the cows.
Sometimes I could see the bay,

but mostly it was a mist or a fog or a shifting cloud cover.
I would heat water for tea,

and sit at my table and lamp while the sunlight, wherever
it was, nibbled at the dark.

I wrote in a lined spiral notebook as much as I could.
I wanted to tell why I joined

and how I came to quit the war. The feeling the words
gave me was as the light did the night before.

Fred Marchant

[I gave myself to Him—]

I thought it something small. Everything was.

Girling from one party to another—I was the prettiest
abbess, my wimple crisply folded, my cocktail habit
vaccinating me against all thought. *Amor vincit omnia*
engraved the length of my thigh,
my pictures all black-barred.

Yes, I was a yes girl. Yes, I had such fun I can't
say I remember. But gradually a heresy took hold—
et tu, Brutal, broke across the horizon
like a hand snuffing out the sun.

For all your cruelties, you're the Him
that I write to, letter after letter, requesting
only that you return me to my prior state.

Have pity on a girl of Catholic tastes.
I want the same as anyone, just more, and faster.
Make nice, make haste, I say, and never yield.

Rebecca Hazelton

³⁸ [Rebecca Hazelton](#), "[I gave myself to Him—]" in [Pleiades](#), collected in [Fair Copy](#), [Ohio State](#)

Inseminator Man

When I call him back now, he comes dressed in the silver of memory,
silver coveralls and silver boots
and a silver hard hat that makes no sense.
The cows could not bombard his head,
though the Lilies and the Buttercups, the Jezebels and Mathildas,
avenged their lot in other ways
like kicking over a pail or stomping on his foot.
Blue welt, the small bones come unknitted,
the big toenail a black cicada peeling off its branch.

...

It wasn't hard to understand their grudge, their harbor of accumulated hurts—
imagine lugging those big tits everywhere, year after year.
Balloons full of wet concrete
hung between their legs like scrotums, duplicate and puffed.
I remember grappling with the nipples
like a teenage boy in a car's backseat
and how the teats would always fill again before I could complete their squeezing out.
At night, two floors above them in the half-demolished barn,
my hands ached and made me dream of cows that drained
until the little stool rose off the ground and I found myself dog-paddling in milk.

...

The summer after college I'd gone off to live with women
who'd forsworn straight jobs and underwear and men.
At night the ten of us linked hands
around a low wire-spool table before we took our meal of vegetables and bread.
Afterward, from where the barn's missing wall
opened out on Mad River, which had no banks but cut an oxbow
flush with the iridescent swale of the lower fields,
I saw women bathing, their flanks in the dim light
rising like mayflies born straight out of the river.

...

Everyone else was haying the lower field when he pulled up,
his van unmarked and streamlined like his wares:
vials of silvery jism from a bull named Festus
who—because he'd sired a Jersey that took first place
at the Vermont State Fair in '53—
was consigned to hurried couplings with an old maple stump
rigged up with white fur and a beaker.
When the man appeared I was mucking stalls in such heat
that I can't imagine whether or not I would have worn my shirt
or at what point it became clear to me that the bull Festus had been dead for years.

...

I had this idea the world did not need men:
not that we would have to kill them personally,
but through our sustained negligence they would soon die off
like houseplants. When I pictured the afterlife
it was like an illustration in one of those Jehovah's Witness magazines,
all of us, cows and women, marching on a promised land
colored that luminous green and disencumbered by breasts.
I slept in the barn on a pallet of fir limbs,
ate things I dug out of the woods,
planned to make love only with women, then changed my mind
when I realized how much they scared me.

...

"Inseminator man," he announced himself, extending a hand,
though I can't remember if we actually spoke.
We needed him to make the cows dry off and come into new milk:
we'd sell the boy calves for veal, keep the females for milkers,
and Festus would live on, with this man for a handmaid,
whom I met as he was either going into the barn or coming out.
I know for a fact he didn't trumpet his presence, but came and went mysteriously
like the dove that bore the sperm of God to earth.

...

He wore a hard hat, introduced himself before I took him in,
and I remember how he graciously ignored my breasts while still giving them wide berth.
Maybe I wore a shirt or maybe not: to say anything about those days now sounds so strange.
We would kill off the boys, save the females for milkers I figured
as I led him to the halfway mucked-out stalls, where he unfurled a glove past his elbow
like Ava Gardner in an old-movie nightclub scene.
Then greased the glove with something from a rusted can before I left him in the privacy of barn light
with the rows of cows and the work of their next generation
while I went back outside to the shimmering and nearly blinding work of mine.

Lucia Perillo

³⁹ Lucia Perillo, "[Inseminator Man](#)," collected in [The Body Mutinies](#), [Purdue University](#)

Amanda Hopper's House

It was a farmhouse for killing,
the kind I saw in the paper above a row of senior portraits:

girls found in the basement.
Frosted eye-shadow, bangs like birds' nests.

Girls I saw and said to myself:
good. they deserve it.

The stupid *sluts*' sit on my tongue.
I swallow, but the stupid sluts stick there like chicken bones.

Like Amanda's older sister, Gloria,
splayed across the hood of her boyfriend's Chevy Nova.

From the breakfast table
we watch him open her dry skinny legs and press

his belt buckle into her denim crotch.
It's 9 am and they chew grape gum.

We follow the unfurling snail silhouettes of their French kisses
as Mrs. Hopper looks out, wary, from behind

the newspaper headline: *Body of Missing Teen Found in Family Shed.*
She fishes in her pink robe for a pack of cigarettes,

places a menthol between her feathering lips,
flicks her lighter, picks her cuticle,

tells us out the corner of her mouth
to stop gaping and eat our fucking Lucky Charms.

Karyna McGlynn

⁴⁰ Karyna McGlynn, "[Amanda Hopper's House](#)," collected in [I Have to Go Back to 1994 and Kill a Girl](#), [Sarabande](#)

The Future is One of Place

The future is one of place
devoid of race.
A jawbone under a sock
is a geological clock.

The plunking of rain
on the termite-riddled windowpane:
reading a Bible on that ledge
is a tiny college.

A Galapagos tortoise is killed
(or, simply, unwilling).
The Ebola virus weeps, or retires,
because, like us, it tires.

Meanwhile, below the subbasement,
a Suede Revolution:
the phlegmatic skill of the cryptographer
soixante-huitards the teleprompter.

The id in facsimile
is suspended on a leash,
twisting in the rain
above that goddammed windowpane.

Being is slightly corrupted
by the Thinking that's one-upped it
(like the pun on pain)
and will never love again.

Brian Kim Stefans

⁴¹ [Brian Kim Stefans](#), "[The Future is One of Place](#)," in [Poetry](#)

Mechanized Bride

The phenomenon is sex by proxy,
the (re)insertion of rogue text.
I am (hyper)textual, an alien

automaton (dis)arranged by median
nerve fibers. You jacked in
to my dollslot, called me a slick witch.

Your chimerical heroin(e).
We are (re)configuring this utopia
where every phantasm is a cyborg

butterfly. What skull drugs figure
in your iridium correlations?
I am (self-)aware, a new version

of noir slut to your outlaw player.
I add horror to your hypothesis.

Susan Slaviero

⁴² Susan Slaviero, "[Mechanized Bride](#)," collected in [Cyborgia](#), [Mayapple](#)

Evolutionary Pleasures

I was talking to this man, this laser-eyed blindster, about my substantial experience dealing with the platypus, so I talk about the platypus a fair amount, because how can you not, right? I mean it's a fucking bird, it's a fucking mammal, and he looked at me and he said, That's what you do, isn't it, you're always making it about the platypus, but then it surfaced that despite his having occasion to meet the platypus and his having dealt cards to them on his own recognizance, watched them frolic in the grass and grow shiny in the remainders of the day, okay, so, he'd even recorded it, some kind of episode with a razor, that this man had not a single intimate idea about how to actually see a platypus, or smell a platypus, no way of really going at it nose-level, no way of getting outside of his own perceptual disfiguration of the platypus.

It was a real heroic kind of creative literary blindness, career-worthy school-built Frankensteinian winsomeness, like this epic white smog of genius the mystery of this man's failure to just let the fucking platypus be, let me tell you, like, give me some thick fucking description of the platypus, that just conversating about the platypus, forgetting of course the magisterial evolutionary question of its genome, I might as well have been talking about an ocelot, ocelot, in fact, being a word I used while speaking with him in a completely unacceptable and erroneous manner, as in my saying, when I said to him, "I ocelot through meetings by grinding a hole in the underside of the conference table with the metal tip of my mechanical pencil. I chew the resulting filings between my front teeth and make a little growl that could be throat-clearing."

I said this and then he nodded, and I thought maybe he thought he was in danger and it would be better to nod, but I tell you it was a quiet night and there wasn't much at this party except for the usual wild rocket hugging the walls smelling mustardy, okay maybe a few white kids committing a bit of autostripping in their third degrees, but nothing I wouldn't say was called for at a time wherein illegalism is a kind of anti-anti-reparational beacon practiced at the highest levels of all three branches of whatever you want to call it, government, institutionalism.

But I wasn't talking about government, I was talking about the platypus, I wanted to talk about the platypus, the sunken projectile hybridity of its idiosyncratic head, what is the nature of its fleshy border, what is its face, the timbre of its call a kind of shuffling of air, the limpidity of its milk, the tender division of the egg by the birthing puggle, its labile form like a waxed bird smoked at the tips, the bill chock full of sensory organs, the tail a library of lifesaving fat.

I wanted to talk about the platypus and what it can do but a great violence was growing within me and Nietzsche called out from the homosexual health spa of heaven just northwest of this man's boyish fan of man hair that When I think of all of the work I'd done to admit to the platypus why don't I devote some time to those dry forgotten corners of sweet cheese you luxuriated in your youth, your ceaseless mental gropes of the poor yellow-pitted bandleader, the fine freed bananas you've browned to the negligent song of your bitching hours, Okay? he asked. Just visualize that vial of misgifted perfume you spent on the toilet, spiteful gold in the Ostern tint, then you! Your precious spray on sheets born to rags. And then you cogitate on that smart, funny actress of some repute you and a much drunker and susceptible friend propositioned at that pseudo-chichi afterparty out of an infinitesimally negligible desire to actually do her, there she was sitting next to her minced-pie-faced husband and she said, My, I am flattered, but she knew and I knew, even the friend who'd later spray vomit the promotional Vampyre Blood Vodka martinis across the white kitchen tile recently installed by the silent, murderous super, that you did it so could say it, that you would never survive bleaching it back to the whiteness, the end of my desire, and so you talk a great fucking game about the platypus.

Sara Jane Stoner

⁴³ Sara Jane Stoner, "[Evolutionary Pleasures](#)," collected in [Experience in the Medium of Destruction](#), Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs

Exhibition of the Hanged Man

To spectate
is a verb

that does not
mean to watch.

It is
intransitive.

Although
the Latin root

spectare
means *to watch*;

nonetheless,
it is wrong

to say
you spectate me;

but not wrong
to say

you watch me.
If you *spectate*

you become
multiple;

you are
an audience

defined by
your attention

to the spectacle.
If I am

the spectacle,
I become

temporal; bounded
in time. I am

an event now,
a kind of show.

I entertain
visitors.

There are
new entrances

to my body,
their edges

outlined in
blacks and grays

and reds like
the entrances

to the face
of a young girl.

Monica Youn

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⁴⁴ Monica Youn, "[Exhibition of the Hanged Man](#)," in [The Paris Review](#), collected in [Blackacre](#), [Graywolf](#)

Slow Crescendo

In the crime shows I've been watching, things culminate into worst case scenarios and long drawn-out scenes of broken pool cues and smeared mascara. A Rottweiler lies down in the snow to die with the prostitute he swore to protect. Around here, all that happens is I wait until four to nap and then have to listen to the family below get home and clomp around like a drunk fourteen year-old in a tube top and clogs. A whole family made up of multiple copies of the same drunk girl and her sad feathered hair.

I should put more beautiful words to this. I should say, *the near October light through blinds*. Or just, *I have a proto-human growing in my abdomen*. *He weighs a little more than a can of Coke*.

Yesterday was cracked and somber, and I made my way uptown, seeking out any odd moment to be weird and gentle after a bummer of a rough morning. Then I lay in a darkened room while a Caribbean lady jabbed a sonogram wand at me to get Peanut to pose right. He acted pretty put out. I wanted to cry. The screen on the wall showed the bones and snow. The beautiful part is that everything's fine.

I've been off coffee, and much of my life is a slow movie on an art gallery wall. You climb into a room with pillows on the floor and watch it all swim around. You are in love with someone you just met, who's lying there, too. You barely touch, but you're also the same person. Part of the movie is a tiny spine, tiny kidneys. A four-chambered heart. Look at all the wonder.

Joanna Penn Cooper

Breaking Glass

God of gas station bathrooms
And of girls held hostage
Inside their own bedrooms—

Girls driven in the ambulance
Of their mother's car
To the nearest lockdown.

Half girls turned tom-
Boys turned zombie,
Drool, beauty-child. And memory

That warm slop of honey,
Seeping. No way to stop it
And its gorgeous hurricane of bees.

Cynthia Cruz

⁴⁶ [Cynthia Cruz](#), "[Breaking Glass](#)," collected in [The Glimmering Room](#), [Four Way](#)

What Fire Was That

Tonight all the stuffing pours out of your father—
the night sprayed with grease.

The night like a lantern
flashing
inside a girl.

You ride toward the fires.

You ride toward your father as you would
the sea. Your horse means

business. Its eyes like parsley, its teeth like shot
glasses. Poor father.

The fog batters everything.
It eats and eats.
The homesick constellations:

The Northern Tire Iron,
The Quilt of Marbles,
The Glitter-Sling, are torn down now

by the fog. When the ride is over
your father is there

burning like a rest stop
in the mountains.
You smell the charred rafters.

You knock, knock, but
no answer. Your horse

will not enter. And you go in
now, you go in.

Gregory Lawless

⁴⁷ [Gregory Lawless](#), "[What Fire was That](#)," in [Drunken Boat](#), collected in [I Thought I Was New Here](#), [BlazeVOX](#)

Night Writing

“ah, the desire, ah, the writing...”
—Anne Waldman

Writing past midnight as usual
I enter a poem with one idea,
end up writing another.
You are already asleep for hours.

I lie down beside you, reach out.
You hold my hand for a while,
then fall back to sleep, snoring.

My breasts are round as similes,
each nipple an exclamation point,
vagina warm as a slant rhyme,
my hands and fingers are verbs.

I come quietly beside you,
a flutter of breeze, a small wave.

My body freed of words,
your breath lulls me to sleep.

Lori Desrosiers

The Moon Moth Lives for a Week after Emerging

You are in a new house. It is your fifth birthday.
The Charles River shushes your tantrums,
infrequent as they have become. The moon moth
is an introvert. Her wings light up the night like limes
but she prefers her Sycamore hollow.

Here is an insect that understands you. At two,
you wanted out only in rain, when everyone else
hid and you held your own roof. Now, you lead
the four year-olds in the march of “naughty coconuts,”
with a bucket on your head, an oak pod on your nose.

At five, I too was a red kite tugging all the bows
behind me. But I was quieted by men who thumped
behind me in their cars, chewing at my plaid.

The moon moth’s tail can be bitten off by predators
without harm to her. Small freed valve of the heart,
I used to be an excellent singer, never apologizing
for improvisation. Hannah, you are fivebeautifulfive
while I am learning that the moon moth has no mouth
as an adult, and this is the reason she dies.

Shari Caplan

⁴⁹ [Shari Caplan](#), “[The Moon Moth Lives for a Week After Emerging](#),” in [Drunk Monkeys](#)

Jersey City Poems

A swirl of trash—
I'm dodging it.
A gust of nasty wind.
Now you're about to be
even more remote.
Look at me, complete bitch
with nowhere to go.
Companion
in tan pants.
I am what to you?
My people wear sneakers
while they hunt and fish,
short perms, cuntish,
so I shouldn't say
something is
wrong with you
because you grew up
in an asshole place.
Together we made
our way here
where the neighbor's noise
drives you deeply inside,
where each A in my name
becomes a long pit, a grave,
where I've got something
in my tooth, some smudge
on my face, something off,
wrong, nothing light now.
Nothing lit up, bright, aflame.

Who called out to me
when my pace slowed
"Skank," the voice said,
The razor wire
that's around anything
nice shining in the dark.
The thing is I am a thing walking,
another nothing,
can to be crushed, bone to be chewed

He moistens his lips
in the street light
and waits or wait,
am I the man? I am.
Asking the price,
setting the time.

Every tank top is frayed
and too tight, summer
too deep to come out
of, every thought
overripe, so sweet
before it reeks. I will use
the two more
years I have of youth
spend thrift,
waste them, trash them.

Laura Cronk

Anew

Look upon me.
Minerva's done this.
In the blue depths
human hair floats willfully
and now, above,
mine slithers, fixed;
I am in love with it.

As far as Poseidon,
I remember clearly
sliding throughout the bulge of the sea,
some of it getting in me—
that it made me jolt and buck
with its implacable shifting, its twisting.

Released like some bone-bereft jellyfish,
I am now one of those, all
head and hair, and hope
never to return to the beforehand;
I am a mother of myth.

Cursed by my kind,
I am more than what were once my kind;
winged horses burst from me
Medusa,
Medusae.

Julia Leverone

⁵¹ [Julia Leverone](#), "[Anew](#)," in [Posit](#)

Butter

I've never seen the land
of milk and honey, but at

the Iowa State Fair I glimpsed
a cow fashioned of butter.

It lived behind a window
in an icy room, beneath klieg lights.

I filed past as one files
past a casket at a wake.

It was that sad: a butter cow
without a butter calf. Nearby I spied

a butter motorcycle, motorcycle-
sized, a mechanical afterthought

I thought the cow might have liked to ride.
You don't drive a motorcycle; you ride it.

But not if you're a butter cow, not
if you're a butter cow who's seen, if

not the land of milk and honey, the land
of milk, and dwelled within it.

It had a short life span, the butter cow.
Before it died, I looked

deep into its butter eyes. It saw
my butter soul. I could

have wept, or spread myself,
for nobody, across dry toast.

Andrea Cohen

I Am Not Built for Dead

bodies—my people in their tsarist shanties
wouldn't have come seen one, only attending
funerals for their own. They came to this land
of table wakes and windowed typhoid caskets
so I could have a new life mourning
those whose books permit remembrance in
the open light. America: the old bureau
that fell on me when I opened too many drawers.
Someone approach and remove it, please, but not
you or you or you—yes, now I see
everyone good is gone, for everyone good
I've averted my eyes and sung OH LET THE CIRCLE,
and all remaining compatriots are awful:
despots too old to be tried, artists in want
of adulation, the couple where the woman
has a kind of tic and makes a racy comment
every twenty minutes. She sucked off a stranger,
she told me, during a stay in the French Quarter,
and her husband snapped then in her turtle face:
NOBODY CARES. EVERYONE HAS A PAST.

Natalie Shapero

⁵³ Natalie Shapero, "[I am not Built for Dead](#)," in [Typo](#), collected in [Hard Child](#), [Copper Canyon](#)

from *Please Bury Me in This*

Even the word *depression*: I am pretending to be alive.

In the Sussex house, I remember reading, Woolf
practiced her dialogue out loud lying in an empty bathtub.

I'm talking to myself with one hand in my hair.

As I decrease, with my head back and my eyes closed, God increases.

This is a black glove pulled off slowly, one finger at a time.

As in my aunt's slanted longhand, *When the train stopped in Auschwitz* . . .

Alone in the backyard, I remember learning to twirl a baton as it grew dark—the silver, gleaming wheel.

This will mean everything: to keep it moving.

~

Or *love*: to be injured in the same way at the same time.

After my father died, I drew a man in chalk on the living room floor and curled under his arm.

This is to say until the rain is streaming down the walls.

Every page a pulse, Dickinson wrote in winter.

Whatever happens after this, I am tired of saying, A herd of black horses.

A herd of black horses.

And look how they run so closely together, like everything that hurts and can't be seen.

Someday I believe, in order to be free, what I say will trample me.

Allison Benis White

⁵⁴ Allison Benis White, "[Even the word depression...](#)" collected in [Please Bury Me in This](#), [Four Way](#)

Your Mother Wasted a Year

Your mother drank nine million tequila gimlets

Your mother wanted them *foamy*

Your mother read *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Your mother walked up Rugby Road feeling restless feeling that teenage feeling feeling *spoiled*

Your mother walked up Rugby Road singing Summer is ready/when you are and it was summer

Your mother walked up Rugby Road listening to *Summer is ready/when you are* and it was technically the last day of winter/the magnolia bulbs were hard knobs against the gray sky/you were a hard knob against your mother's pelvis/she lifted her feet one by one by

Your mother's manicure was *Blue-Away* and impeccable

Your mother's lipstick was *NSFW*

Your mother drank seven Estonian beers

Your mother poured that year down the drain like the coffee in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

Your mother knew that waste is *luxury*

Your mother said I don't want to grow up I want to *spoil*

Your mother didn't want to lose weight

Your mother didn't want to do homework

Your mother didn't want to lean in

Your mother didn't want to preregister for daycare

Your mother lost touch with all her friends

Your mother only played video games

Your mother leveled up but not IRL

Your mother held the domestic record for longest quickening chain in Final Fantasy XII

Then your father achieved the same score but only after

Your mother knows it's mean to say the year in which you were conceived is a year she wasted

Your mother knows that now that you, the trace of you, exists, she can never waste anything again

Your mother knows that “can never” means “should never” but also “will never be able to”

Your mother knows that “she can never” means “she is not”

Your mother knows that when you made your shape known she folded up her I

Your mother holds you in her pocket like a ticket

Your mother could not lift her head from the sofa on New Year’s Eve

Your mother said *why didn’t anyone invite me anywhere for New Year’s Eve*

Your mother used to think *what if I threw myself under a truck*

Your mother thinks *what if I let you kill me*

Your mother painted your room blue because you’re supposed to be a girl

Your mother was denied financing

Your mother walked up Rugby Road and “Pretty Good Year” came on and she thought

Your mother used to feel bad about the boys she couldn’t love

Your mother knows you are her opus

Your mother wrote you all over her diary

Your mother put you on her google calendar

Your mother knows she will get the reminder

Caolan Madden

CHICORA, 1895
Lake Michigan

Cups and plates spilled
into the lake, a terrible clattering
lost among splitting timbers.

The fury was so great
it exceeded sound, numbed
the ears of a coal passer,

who paused, mute on the tilted deck,
and spotted the dishes in torrent and foam.
They looked as though they were soaking

in soap suds. A dipper from a gravy bowl
spinning on the surface, cream
from a milk crock swirling in liquid

as dark as the sky. Some men
he knew had already tasted it—
were sinking beneath a new milky way.

Cindy Hunter Morgan

⁵⁶ [Cindy Hunter Morgan](#), "[Chicora, 1895](#)," collected in [Harborless](#), [Wayne State](#)

Against Amnesia

Everyone knows that if a tree falls in the woods, and no one hears it, it makes no sound. That if an orgasm sighs in the dark, and no one listens, the sigh is silent. If God flames among the bushes, and there is no Moses nearby, His words are like the mumblings of a madman. For the trees, like the orgasms, like the flames and God, must share their shadows, their thoughts, their loneliness in order to exist at all. If an orgasm does not dream the world and all its aspects, the world has no soul. Without a soul, there is no life or wind, no breath and no trembling or blazing leaves. This is the mathematic equation known by orgasms alone. It is their job to keep the sacred balance, to keep us all from curling inward like a scroll, never to be read or known.

Nin Andrews

⁵⁷ [Nin Andrews](#), "[Against Amnesia](#)," in [Harpur Palate](#), collected in [Our Lady of the Orgasm](#), [MadHat](#)

from *The Dead Girls Speak in Unison*

One of us said

[muffled]

One of us said

[gagging]

One of us said

[a knocking sound]

she'd pull off your face

and mail it to fuck town.

[titters]

Danielle Pafunda

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⁵⁸ Danielle Pafunda, "[One of us said...](#)" collected in [The Dead Girls Speak in Unison](#), [Bloop](#)

Hush

The summer you stop speaking is a wet one, rain
pouring down, fat drops
of condensation dancing down your mother's
ever-melting glass

of gin and Fresca. The air, heavy enough to hold
in your palm, reeks of dank
moss and drowned potato bugs. As soon as you stop
speaking, your world

becomes earsplitting—faucet handles screech in the cold
porcelain sink, water roaring
in the walls through copper pipes, baseboards scraped
bare by so many

wood roaches and mice, the one fallen column
of the porch, hollow, where
a raised whisper, the hiss of your parents' secret
exchange, threatens

the brittle balance of it all. They don't notice your silence
for days, but
he knows. After dinner he slices into a square icebox
cake, pauses, staring as if

at the double rectangles of turned earth still fresh in the far
corner of the yard. You simply
stop talking, and it's easy. You do the things
you're told, make your bed first

thing, take your dish to the sink, comb your hair, part
straight, and fasten bows on each side.
Your father stops talking too, but only to you. No one
notices. Each time you slip out

from the hall bathroom he's there waiting, a smile
and a swift, sharp smack
across your bottom hard enough to let you know
who's boss. You know. You slip

outside, hopping along the toad-dotted walkway. You take off
on your brother's bike, standing
on the pedals to reach the high handlebars, riding like
that, like a tottering lopsided

old lady, pumping up the lane. At the top of
the hill, where bayou turns to
piney woods, you spot them. The French sisters—Candy
and Cookie—twins,

whose house is a replica of your own, upended and facing
north, but otherwise
identical. You've been coming here every day for a week—
the French family van

backing into the neighborhood the best thing to happen
all summer—you are wretched jealous
of their beauty, bandana halters knotted over baggy
men's dress slacks (from when

their daddy worked for the man, cut off just below
the knee, belted and tied with
rope and braids and beads. When they whip
their matching waist-length hair

out of their eyes, their faces are a dotted snowy
hillside, berries fallen in the freeze.
And their hands, moving as quickly as they do
between one another, are long and

the beds of their nails are pale and graceful. You know
the ASL alphabet from school, but that's
all. Your questions arrive as quickly as a tick getting off
of a dog. The picnic table

is covered with sturdy string and big wooden beads
painted orange and red and
green, by pine needles fallen in bunches from the canopy
of woods, by scissors and soda cans

and bottles of polish. They teach you to sign: a few words
a day. The first:
braid, sky, sun, knees. The second: *tree, sister, table,*
kiss. You sit in the corrugated

sunlight while their hands fly between knots
and conversation, and they laugh
their far away laugh that sounds like a girl
locked in a metal shed, trying

to get out. You hum a tune your
father used to sing
when you were small. On Wednesdays you
finish the belt. The circles

under your eyes are the exact green of moss growing
thick on cold boulders
of bayou banks. That day when they show you: *pinch, love, drink*
and (when their daddy appears with more

Mellow Yellows) *father*. He seems nice, Mr. French.
You tie the knots of your belt
too tight and try not to think of the night
before.

Mr. French gives you a thumbs-up, as if you're the
winner of a beauty contest wearing
his cut off polyester orange plaid leisure slacks.
Mr. French has a habit of throwing out

his arms to the whole earth and signing. *This is
the life!*
You wonder about your own father, how long he'd been
planning his move.

Perhaps he thought it up the day we came home
from vacation
at Auntie Lina and Uncle Lou's soy and strawberry
farm, only to find our two

poodles dead on the back porch, shriveled and
thin and rained on and
reeking. Miss Oneida always kept the dogs
when we traveled, spoiled

them bad, but this time she passed away the day
we left and her family came
from Tupelo, held a wake and funeral, had a big
reception laid out nice

in the rear yard. No one knew about the dogs. The first
night home you and mama
put the dogs in boxes, wrapped up in Easter paper
covered in pastel

crosses, and burned them in the back corner
of the yard, as deep as you, leveling
the soil. Maybe it was then. You smooth the bumpy
length of your new belt

and wonder. Or maybe it was the night you
first figured a way to keep him
out, wedging the tall desk chair so tight
under the knob. That night, waiting

as you did, you saw the knob rattle, then
quiet. The next day your chair
was in the kindling pile. That night you
came up with a better plan; you ask him

and mama to tuck you in, you say
your prayers right
nice and close your eyes, faking
happy slumber. The instant

they leave the room, you
slide open the window, pop
the screen, hop out and are gone. You sit on
the two fresh graves and wait.

He comes, wanders the corners
of your room, sees the open
window, places a hand through it carefully as if
the glass might still be there.

You raise your arms and sign *This is the...* but
he spots your blue floral gown
in the moonlit yard and shuts the window, pulls
the latch. For three nights

after that you sleep, in your own room, in your
own bed, with the door
open, peacefully, no interruptions.
Your father, as he passes

on the way to bed, is singing lightly
*You are my sunshine, my only
sunshine, you make me happy when skies are
gray. You'll never know, dear,*

*how much I love you, please don't take my sunshine
away.*

You get up early every day and put on Mr. French's
pants and stand-ride

the 5-speed up to see the twins. The day it
happens you coast down
the hill home and commit to memory the signs for
pretty and *love* and *secret*.

You are sound asleep in bed, dreaming
of the bayou, only silence
and a pair of red-headed
woodpeckers to share

your picnic. In the dream there is
a panic of wings, of woodchips
falling, of air too heavy for flight.
You're pinned.

You wake, see him hovering, your
door shut tight,
nightgown and covers thrown
to the floor, skin

clammy, cold. The room
is filled with night air, the scent
of locust husks, of pine pollen and rock moss
and road dust and frogs. As he

lifts you into his arms: you don't
hear, you don't make
a sound. Out the window, into
the yard, plodding slowly

he carries you to the back behind
the pine grove.
You see in the cerulean moonlight a new
grave, a larger, longer one,

wormy and fresh, closer to the fence. Fireflies dart
in the trees above
and suddenly you, too, are flying, fast, through
darkness. You

hit bottom, hard. It takes your breath like
falling straight backwards
off a swing. You can't think of anything but
the playground

as great clods of dirt sift down on your stomach
and hips, your
naked chest, filling the white hollow at
the base of your neck.

The dirt comes in heaves, topping you head
to toe and even though
it stings, you keep your eyes open, silent
prayer begging

God to let you fly away. You see his white
cotton boxers shining bright; his glasses
like flashes of moonlight. Shoveling, he turns
away from you and swings back to the grave.

Those glasses like warning lights at the edge
of a track, where there
aren't any safety bars. The dirt piles up
and suddenly you hear it,

your whole world—locusts and crickets,
hanging moss shifting
in the oak, zipping wing of firefly, a hound
howling in a far off yard.

You hear the music of your world and it sounds
so far
away, a twangy echo kept in a plastic
coffee can.

And that's when you hear it, your father's
voice, the same words
whispered, sung quiet and sincere,
You'll never know

*dear, how much I love you. Please don't take
my sunshine away.*

He grabs you up and out and holds you
in his lap and

cries, muddying your tummy. *If you
leave me, to love
another, you'll regret it all of
your days.*

He holds you, rocks the dawn in, and you
hum the song with
him and cling like the saved
do, and vow

to stop speaking, in the hush of that night.

Alice Anderson

I'm Forced to Imagine There Are Two of Me Here

To fit in we practice not dancing I pull her hair against our head & burn
the water out she sucks-in the lip of our belly

I call her Rio say Rio remind them of our white grandmother
do what it takes to make them think we are like them

Because it is a risk to want us we close the bedroom door she reaches under
the blanket It's just me Rio & The Dark
does she part my legs or The Dark's I spit into our hand & touch her

Sometimes she bites our lips to make them smaller we refuse
to dance we do what it takes

I let her drive Little Cottonwood Canyon It is night we hit a deer breath
from its nostrils clouds the windshield It feels like there could be more
of us somewhere she opens the car doors we show each other mercy

take the same bite of a cracked rib blood from her mouth I move to kiss the animal

Rio Cortez

⁶⁰ [Rio Machete Cortez](#), "[I'm Forced to Imagine There are Two of Me Here](#)," collected in [I have learned to define a field as a space between mountains](#), Jai-Alai Books

Elephants Walking

Curled in a window seat, level with wind-swayed oak, aching on a green vinyl pad, I think of the fortunes spent on the hardwood, wainscot study, and the slates fitted for the arbor walkways, the labor it took to lug bricks out to each overly articulated corner, in which nook a child of fortune, cushion-tassel between his fingers, might look up from his reading to see in the heat waves rising over the pale, shimmering delphinium, a plot miracle perhaps, the strange death by spontaneous combustion in *Our Mutual Friend*, and the child wondering how, why, and could it have been?

My childhood bedroom, summer night, one hand marking the book, the other's palm and fingers printing moist, disappearing shadows on the wall. Then the college library, Harkness Hall, and aged, white-cowled Father Benilde smelling of coffee, muscatel, and Old Spice as he opened the doors at 7:30. First in line, I was all business, heading straight to my end of the long, immovable table, to my first reading of Dante, a paperback copy of Ciardi, with its cover of red, grinning, cartoon devils, which I had in a fit of verisimilitude (a word I had just learned) charred with a lighter.

My first lines that year: "Butt, butt, base, bale beast.
I fear your horns not
the least!" The intended tone was courtly love, but the words were apostrophe to a buffalo in Roger Williams Park, one that had leaned hard into the sagging hurricane fence near my date. The lines came to me as I woke after a nap in the library. I still love to sleep in libraries whenever I can. I fix my head sideways over my folded hands, and make room for the little puddle of drool I'll quickly wipe away. I wake into a barely believable clarity throughout my body. I'm ready to grapple with fate, love, sex, the stirrings within. Over readers and sleepers alike hovers a mist or a pollen, and in it I see words shuttling back and forth like birds. In the darkness or dream something hugely important has been free to roam. Grateful, I say to myself, "Elephants have been walking."

"Son, we must give this country great poetry!" decreed the older poet to my nodding head, as he shook my hand after the Crystal Room reading. Later, as I walked back to my dormitory, sleet failing to cool me I turned his pronoun over and over, thinking yes, we do, *we* do. On the news there was the familiar footage: a Phantom run ending in a hypnotic burst of lit yellow napalm. I knew the war was wrong, but that was why, I claimed, I should go, to sing the song of high lament, to get it into the books. Like Ishmael I would sign on for a three-year voyage under a madman captain. Frissons to be had instantly: a pity-the-youth-soon-dying look in the eyes. "Are you crazy?" asked my girlfriend. But I was filled with vibrant life and felt neither suicidal nor confused when I dialed the Marine recruiter: "Yes, I look forward to reporting." Phone in my lap, I sat sideways, my legs dangling over the arms of my red leather reading chair. A warm spring wind was melting the snow

down to bright medallions of ice. I felt clear-headed and refreshed.
I just hoped the war would last until I got there. Elephants were walking.

Fred Marchant

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⁶¹ [Fred Marchant](#), "[Elephants Walking](#)," collected in [Tipping Point](#), [The Word Works](#)

Skylab Party

The US space laboratory, Skylab I, plunged to Earth this evening, scattering debris across the southern Indian Ocean and sparsely populated Western Australia.

I covered my grandfather's WWI helmet with aluminum foil
and stood on the roof of Reno De Vino's apartment building
drinking myself into eternal life. I believed in alcohol
and aluminum foil. The sky was falling. It clouded with the chatter
of the universe's joke. Others borrowed my helmet. It was a hit.
A blow for freedom. Nobody fell off the roof but within five years
three of us were dead. Is falling. I shot rubber-tipped arrows into the air
and slept with a pot-head ex-model from L.A. We danced to maybe
the B-52s or The Clash, The Police or P-Funk. Did they really think
that helmet would protect them in the trenches? 19 million dead.
Put that in your hat and smoke it. Somebody blew bubbles.
We were graduate students majoring in minoring. Nothing
fell anywhere—19 million? Thirty people on a roof
in Bowling Green, Ohio, and a good time may have been had
by most. Just a small piece of debris—somebody shouting up at us
to shut up. The helmet wobbled on my head. The ex-model
thought it was cute. Lighting will eventually strike the same spot—
in either ten minutes or a million years. Lightning is commonly
misspelled. Sex is commonly overrated. I lost my license for eternal life
and returned the helmet to the family archives back in Detroit.
I miss those three—one suicide, one maybe-suicide,
the other, a random internal explosion. Nothing
could get me down in those trenches. Life was good,
even with hemorrhoids. Even lying in a hospital
with a wife and girlfriend having it out across the bed.
I quit drinking, then started again a year later. Beer and potato chips.
Pills and no appetite. The two Vietnam vets in our program
lived together in a trailer and did not attend the Skylab party
but surely got wasted, as they did every night.
We left a lot of trash up there on the moon.

Jim Daniels

⁶² Jim Daniels, "[Skylab Party](#)," in [The South Carolina Review](#), collected in [Apology to the Moon](#), [Bat Cat](#)

Matar as Saudades

In the short dream, she falls down the stairs again and again,
singing in a bloodied wedding dress, the crowd
breathless. My hands tied, again, to the chair to keep me from
rushing the stage and kissing her lovely, dead mouth.
I never wanted her more than when she died for a love she pretended
was real. Desire's sweetest fiction in three acts
and an encore. In the middle dream, an angel milks venom
from a snake while I dig and dig in the wet dirt of a grave
to pull free a child. Waxy thing, unwelcome need, forehead
stained with pink. The child's birthmark —
her mother's silhouette. I command my beloved to return
to me but the child wails and wails, weeping white sap
until my hands stick to her. A contract. The will of the forest.
A love with a future instead of a past. Like glass shattered
by a high note, it is foreshadowed by music. Like a dog
bristling between a girl and a jaguar, it is ferocious
and sleepless and bound for tragedy, but not now. Now begins
the long dream where I believe my fear and adore it,
where I hear the tolling of a song I lived in my early years, peeling
underwater like a summons. It belongs to a longing
that murmured my name before falling down a flight of stairs,
that I still seek knowing I'll find snakes nesting
in the rotted house and the darling dead on my old mattress,
her mouth bloodless, waiting, impossible to resist.

Traci Brimhall

⁶³ Traci Brimhall, "[Matar as Saudades](#)," in [Waxwing](#)

About Derrida, If You're Into That

Badgers remind me of the problem with metaphors and how everything is and isn't a metaphor, but in the end you have to pick a side or else. It's why I haven't yet written about when I was in Teach for America, which is a kind of Peace Corps for putting silvery-spoon summa cum laudes in inner city schools. And since we weren't near the center of anything, you can tell inner city is a metaphor for other things, and one of them is how I was proud of myself for being a white person in a room with black teenagers, and then I was ashamed to realize what I was, and then there were a lot of pencils and books and staplers and shoes being thrown and I was a rabbit, I guess. Even when I was pressing the buzzer to the principal's office or yelling "Listen, just listen!" or moving names on Post-it notes down the consequences chart recommended in all the classroom management training sessions while the students laughed that they were winning the game.

When a badger catches a baby rabbit from the nest you were just minutes ago cooing to have found, the screaming is so human anybody would cry and be afraid for themselves and realize you must not interrupt before it's finished. After they've formed a mating pair, badgers still bite each other to bleeding, jaw-locked over a scrap of prairie dog. When the mother is weaning she brings a carcass back to the burrow so she can cut at the faces of her pups as they try to eat.

My students were neither badgers nor prairie dogs. This is not meant to be a metaphor, but I know when I tell you some characters are white and some are black and there's correlative imagery about animals, metaphors will happen, and I don't know how to control the way they are received. Maybe that's the reason why when I was watching a nature documentary on PBS, it felt like that day the really huge girl in the back row whose name I don't remember anymore, even though she was the worst part of third period, stopped her loud chatter, the fuck-you-white-woman-trying-to-assert-your-authority-in-the-form-of-a-verb-conjugation-worksheet chatter, long enough to say, "If you teach us as *individuals*, then we'll listen." That was the thesis anyway of a much longer, self-important speech about how I didn't even know my students' names, much less what they needed to know to be adults in this neighborhood, and I had the gall to tell them to care about how to say *je m'appelle* and spend hours of their lives piddling with *être*. She was right on, except for how there were thirty-two students and she could only see herself in her desk, and I could only see myself in front of rows and rows of individuals who were sleeping or playing cards or calling me bitch and also I couldn't stop thinking that being from Greenlawn or Swanee shouldn't mean no one teaches you how to condescend with a properly accented pronunciation of *croissant*.

That girl wasn't in my class anymore when I found out she was twenty and a junior and mother to a daughter who was already walking and talking. Badgers do almost nothing but dig, and they don't blink to grab a fresh-killed pheasant from right out of a bobcat's mouth. Because of the striped faces, they seem cute and lovable as a skunk, but if they are awake, they are hissing in a way that reminds me of my own lumbering toddler, who came a long time after I left that place and made me feel sorry about everything I ever said to all the troubled or abused children I've known, which is getting to be really a lot now in this line of work, and I've never helped any of them yet. I think because there's no such thing as help. The high school was ringed by barbed wire and the windows were made of a plastic that eventually faded to a dingy yellow. When a kid broke a window, they put up a new piece of plastic. I had a key to the bathroom, but was forbidden to give it out and almost never did I give it out anyway.

Badgers are ruthless by design—their mothers work hard at making them so. With the kids I know it's different, because some of them are as tough as badgers and others are entirely something else, prairie dogs or pheasants or bobcats or rabbits, and by the time I have the metaphor straight, it's the last day of school and Jeff—I still remember his name—is running down the hall hanging onto those pants I told him every day to pull up, and some kid I don't know and don't care about is chasing him. It's going to be a fight and Jeff is going to be expelled this time, I guess. Probably not. Even when I beg them to expel kids, they don't do it. Probably I've just been looking for a fight this whole year and it's the last day and I want something to go my way, so I grab him under the armpits, and tell myself it's so he can't throw a punch. He's totally exposed, flailing and frantic like a pheasant, but that other kid stops at the sight of my teeth-bared face, then turns away down the stairs. For a long time I told this story like it was a moment I got right, but there is no right. There were other kids in the hallway and they were throwing free condoms from the clinic at each other. The bell rang. It was summer vacation. Cellophane packets fell in a glittering prophylactic rain. I bent to pick up my keys and one was stuck in my hair.

After ten years, it almost never comes up in conversation. I meet people and they wouldn't guess how much I love watching the kids ring up around a fight and some teacher has to push in there and grab someone out by the ear. It's exciting and violent. It's like one of those bushes of pink flowers blooming by the sign that warned bringing a gun into this school carries a penalty of five years hard labor. Every morning six buses line up in front of that sign and everyone who gets off the bus is wearing khaki pants and a blue-collared shirt with a patch over the right breast of a roaring panther and the words "Jefferson High." When the police came with their masks on, Derrida was one of the students on the roof throwing bricks. When the bobcat brought down the bird with a pounce and a swipe, he lowered his mouth to feed but then the hissing badger shuffled up. He scorns the cat, makes him beg, makes him slink for the picked-over carcass of his own kill. Which one wouldn't I want to be?

Kathryn Nuernberger

⁶⁴ [Kathryn Nuernberger](#), “[About Derrida, If You're Into That](#),” in [Harpur Palate](#), collected in [The End of Pink](#), [BOA](#)

Unclassified Stars

1.

One summer, Gretel is sent to live with her grandmother by the sea. We are told that the house is gingerbread. Sugar panes in the windows and so forth. The ocean winds bring sweet, delicious smells from the house down the bluffs. Gulls peck at gumdrops on the sill. In the story, the old woman ties an apron around her middle and brings Gretel cold cups of milk in the mornings. In fact, she wears gypsy scarves and drinks gin over ice. *Darling*, she says, flicking her cigarette and exhaling two lungs worth of dust, *this isn't one of your stories*.

2.

Never mind Grandmother and the liquor and the gulls. The sea is a fact, and its air has edges. Most mornings, Gretel can be found floating on her back in the bay, her small breasts breaking the surface. The pink color of shells. She imagines the candied remains of the eaves dissolving under her tongue.

3.

In the original version, even the sea is a lie. The setting is a forest and Gretel has a brother, Hansel. He shreds bread as they walk to keep track. This, however, is the children's version. It does not account for Gretel's curves, or the way Hansel looks at her under the unclassified stars. He feeds her little pieces of bread with his hands. She takes them into her mouth, nibbling on the tips of his fingers. Life, we've been warned, doesn't taste like it should in stories.

4.

Disregard the part about the bread. It's not that they are lost, but that they keep themselves like a secret. People in town wouldn't understand, but we're better listeners. This is the kind of incest readers champion: cheek to cheek since the womb, sharing a nursery in the formative years. It has always been this way. Gretel and Hansel, Gretel and Hansel. In the picture book, they share open-mouthed kisses in the long shadows, unaware of our eyes.

5.

Ultimately, all revisions of her life collapse into one: the sharpening sea, the candied eaves of the cottage, Hansel's salty fingers in her mouth. At the end of the story, where the moral should be, there are only two nudes reclining, naked and flushed beneath a great oak. Babies in the wood. Who's to say where one ends and the other begins? Where the body forgets its edges. Where the story drops off and calls itself memory, life. Who's to say? They have been rolling so long in the leaves, their two skins smell exactly the same.

Maggie Smith

⁶⁵ Maggie Smith, "Unclassified Stars," in *Mid-American Review*, collected in *The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison*, Tupelo

Somebody Gets Shot at the RV Park

and suddenly the place is flooded with search lights and Mellencamp. Men with boring haircuts pick up plastic deer, shake the spare keys out, put them down. They've got you bike-chained to the picnic table because you're the prime suspect. Because somebody told somebody that you're the type of person who leaves their suitcase unattended at the airport. All the detectives are drunk; it's Oktoberfest. Between interrogations, they pound on the table, demanding meats and puddings. "What is your occupation?" asks a man with a sweaty red mustache. "Adjunct Professor," you tell him. "What subject do you teach?" asks a man who looks eight-months pregnant. "Freshman Composition," you answer. Their lips quiver like bowstrings and you can tell that the facts have not fallen in your favor. It's as if they've had a collective epiphany: all their lives you've been tricking them into too-tight pants. "I don't have a *motive*," you tell them as they check the box on the form that says that you do.

Karyna McGlynn

⁶⁶ Karyna McGlynn, "[Somebody Gets Shot at the RV Park](#)," collected in [Hothouse](#), [Sarabande](#)

Fortuitous Poem

I feel bad for Sylvia Plath's Esther, trying
to read Finnegans Wake in the middle
of a nervous breakdown. This morning, the sun
on the dining room table—we have a table now—

and I notice that my local goat cheese looks like
an angel when I first spread it on my sprouted bread.
This is the problem with lyric poems and class rage.
If I weed the irises and have a dining room table, I

suspect myself. Everything must happen for a reason.
Isn't that what Voltaire's fool said? I will stop trying
to solve the equation of human suffering—X people
stuck at airports plus X people killed in a gas attack

minus whatever our government is doing plus whatever
our government is doing... Meanwhile I'm here in a room
managing my small son, who has sensory problems at
the classroom Shabbat. Too many people in one room

plus the singing plus the rabbi coming in and reading
a book equals E. turning to shove one ear to my chest,
then bursting into a different state, shouting out in the middle
of the Passover book, "Why didn't they free themselves!"

and hopping about the room. "Then Moses parted the sea,"
the rabbi says patiently. I gather up my child as the book
ends. I go home and try to weed, but he cries about
the "poor little weeds." Later he tells me he stops

loving me when I'm mad, but starts again later. I've
been so often mad during these months. I want to say
something about "let my people go," which tradition is
partly my son's—enslaved ancestors—but I also want

to say that in Adonis' Syria, being a poet earns you
the threat of death. Speaking and not speaking do
matter. For a week, I lost the Swiss Army knife

I carry with me everywhere, but yesterday
I found it among the spatulas.

Joanna Penn Cooper

Newtown

Like a cement statue, Jesus sits amidst a funnel cloud of flipped-over plastic chairs. All the desks show signs of stress. Names remain written on whiteboards and stars still mark good behavior. The furnace kicks on. Papers trestle the dead teacher's desk on their way to the floor. There is nothing he can do. In the coming days, out-of-state cleaning crews will descend like crows to lift only the lightest stains. Where they fail, the carpet must be cut away. The town whispers his father's name in hyphenated damn its, while on his head thorns turn like screws.

Amelia Martens

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⁶⁸ [Amelia Martens](#), "[Newtown](#)," collected in [The Spoons in the Grass Are There to Dig a Moat](#), [Sarabande](#)

from *IRL*

And *ugh*
someone in this wreck
unironically says somethin
about being with the
“big dogs” & the voice
is coming from within my body.
By books I’m body beautiful
with the big dogs By
the oracle of meter:
aortic, epiphanic,
epipenic—heartbeat
of the streets and walkways
and freeways and byways
and one ways and bike
ways of the mind
's nimble tug on the
tongue of the page. Memory
would be way less
committed without the primordial guide-
post of rhythm, cycles
of turning leaves. Just look
at fair weather southern Ca-
lifornia—so pretty right?
But so so dumb. So dumb.

Tommy Pico

⁶⁹ Tommy Pico, “[And ugh someone in this wreck...](#)” collected in [IRL](#), [Birds](#)

Boat Sonnet

My friend keeps sending me protective Marys,
and last year E. kept picking up gravel,
pressing it upon me in his small hand
with some urgency. "Happy rock." I dated a guy
in Milwaukee who told me, "You just don't seem
as happy as you should." You don't say?
He moved to Madison and bought a boat.
I imagine Hepburn saying, "you have to row
your own boat," but enabling Spencer Tracy, who
never divorced. After that, though, she could wear
her white shirts & gardening trousers and go on
Dick Cavett, not giving a damn about anything.
In my daydream, I lie down in the bottom of a
boat and float away, meaning I marry my soul.

Joanna Penn Cooper

This Neverender

There's a saw discontinues the loved who are void I have seen it.

I have seen it as I have seen from the mess hall
their seventh-degree burns rise again.

As I have seen in the bagnio my consumption it rises again.

This existence in which I blame god on the tree line through which you no longer intrude.

This ending in which I withdraw myself from your banks but I've seen it.

When I return from you like a failed occupation.

And I stalk your geese who make laughingstock of my enemies.

And into their villages.
And the clothes I wear gasoline.

There's a love that persuades you I've seen it:
beating to death a politico

on the steps of the white house for another half century

will equal a riot
on behalf of the strange who were loved

who are void
but I've loved it.

I have loved it as I have loved the mobs who are coming to disfigure my liberty.

Who say a stranglehold's coming for me
that cares least for my throat.

And this existence in which I blame money on the lowland into which you won't cloud.

And they tell me god's wealth is my throat within reach but I've seen it.

I have seen it as I have seen you bed down in a pauper's grave
and the worms tell you god is sketch.

I have seen them announce
the airstrikes are here for your mess halls

but I can't say if I felt the compunction.

If I did I was young.

Or if I did I was you.

And god's wealth was my throat within reach.

Danniel Schoonebeek

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⁷¹ [Danniel Schoonebeek](#), "[This Neverender](#)," in [Bat City Review](#), collected in [Trébuchet](#), [University of Georgia](#)

from *Please Bury Me in This*

I am not any closer to saying what I mean.

Love has made itself so quiet, a few red fish moving in slow circles.

I want to say like blood, like forgiveness, this obedience, looking at the ground on my knees.

I mean to cease to feel, to cancel, to give up all claim to—

At some point, I rested my hands over my eyes and mouthed, This is my face housed underwater.

This is a love letter.

Every word but *mouthed* erased.

~

Dear Kitty, Dear God, Dear Lucifer.

I cut my hair off this morning, placed the long blond braid in an envelope.

There is only one arc: suffering, transformation.

Dear Linda, Sexton wrote to her daughter on a flight to St. Louis, *I love you*.

In other words, these words, their spectacular lack.

~

I mean my head is a napkin folded into a swan.

I mean these are death letters—an obsession with something colorless, private.

You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that—

And then nothing but my hands unfolding the swan and smoothing it over my lap.

~

Now my neighbor through the wall playing piano, I imagine, with her eyes closed.

When she stops playing, she disappears.

I am still waiting for the right words to explain myself to you.

When there was nothing left to smoke, I drew on my lips with a pen until they were black.

Or is this what it means to be empty: to make no sound?

I pressed my mouth to the wall until I'd made a small gray ring.

Or maybe emptiness is a form of listening.

Maybe I am just listening.

Allison Benis White

⁷² [Allison Benis White](#), "[I am not any closer to saying what I mean...](#)" collected in [Please Bury Me in This](#), [Four Way](#)

Wolf Lake, white gown blown open

White sky, a tinge of blue,
birds like silver crucifixes
children wear at their First Communion—
the lake, melted candelabra—
no wind, no dust of summer moths, no weeping.
Lichen sleeps like fur on a dead thing
and the bones of the trees don't creak
and the woody stems of the cattails hold
the earth steady—
bearded fish are like drunken tangents of thought
that trail so far from the original idea—
for instance
I once fished here, bass after bass,
shined the flashlight down their throats
and saw all the way to the gold ovaries,
gill slits like louvered blinds
letting out light—
meat, heart, memory.
The boat was the green of naiveté,
the oars mismatched,
and who was that girl—a bride—
catching everything
and releasing nothing?

*

Jack in the Pulpit breaks through.
Purple veins comb the spathe, then the spadex
furred-over with male and female blooms
and the cone of firm red berries—
and the trillium's white gown blown open—
and the lapping sound of water,
like a dog compelled to lick itself.
Lake infested with black swans,
beaks breaking the surface tension
of the water
then pulling out, swallowing down
a writhing fish, another,
dissatisfied.

*

There is mist, there is a smudge of moonlight on the water—
lake the color of the groom's Italian leather shoes.
I grind against him on the muddy edge,
open the gold buttons to get to the skin,
the throbbing lip and tongue and cock—
flesh, right now, the wet smear of him

on my palm and lips and inside me,
inside, where I live, right now bitter with him,
dandelion juice, phosphorous,
muck, milk, food—
and beneath us snail shells burst
like the skulls of the dead in the crematorium.

*

There is body, there is experience, there is narrative,
there is idea, memory, philosophy, love—
and there are gods
and there are the operas of the gods—
there is desire
and desire's cold blue-eyed twin—
and this place in-between—water,
weeds bound by tangled fishing line,
bones washed clean,
and ghosts, laced and corseted, dragging
their anchors and sinkers and veils.

Diane Seuss

⁷³ Diane Seuss, "[Wolf Lake, white gown blown open](#)," in [Poetry Daily](#), collected in [Wolf Lake, White Gown Blown Open](#), [University of Massachusetts](#)

Mr. Polk was Afraid of the Rain

No damage we did to his garden would bring him out of doors
if the slightest drizzle leaked off his rusty roof. After a while,
beheading his tulips got boring so we'd fetch his paper for a penny.
He didn't mind us dripping on the carpet.

*I have been to the meadow,
I have been to the shore,
I have been to the ghetto,
I have been to the war.*

One stormy November weekend my mother tsked
and brought him bread and eggs. He repaid us
with shortbread so buttery it slipped through our fingers.

*I have seen the boys bite,
I have seen the boys lie,
I have seen the boys fight,
I have seen the boys die.*

Once when I came home whistling
a glory hymn we sang in school, Mr. Polk
beamed me with a half-eaten apple. From twenty yards.

*I once knew a Thomas,
I once knew two Jacks,
They went out in August,
They came home in sacks.*

When I was old enough to join, I knocked on his door
to show him the uniform. He brought me inside
holding my elbow like he was helping an old
woman cross the street. Showed me
his medals and trophies: two stars, a fistful of ribbons,
and a tooth inside a velvet ringbox.

*Thomas was hit in the heart,
Jack was hit in the brain,
The other Jack was blown apart,
They all were hit in the rain.*

Adam Sol

⁷⁴ Adam Sol, "Mr. Polk was Afraid of the Rain," collected in [Crowd of Sounds](#), [House of Anansi](#)

At The Fishhouses

And the black water under the boats with their pools
of bilge rainbowed out like rinds
of steak fat, the salt thick
in my nostrils, but pleasant, too: details
I still remember from Bishop's poem, everything
else about it lost. At the docks,
I watched my friend slip
in her rubber boots; the wide, wet planks
glossy with mosses. You must walk
duckfooted to get to the boats, the black and orange
fishing barrels, the air with its tang
of rusted metals. There are always hooks
and anchors to be found, nets and scrapings
of wood planed by chisel, the way
my great-grandmother was said
to have worked, employed as a shipwright
on the city's waterways in the '30s according
to the newspaper clipping my grandmother
photocopied for me each Christmas.
The description of her gunmetal hair
and slim torso clad in overalls, the hands
she held out for the *Times* reporter
("Callused," he noted, "strong as a man's")
does not recall the woman
I remember for her farm in Bothell
before it became a Seattle suburb, helping me gather
raspberries from the long canes
she planted by her porch. We spent an afternoon
together sweating in the same long-sleeved
checkered shirts she'd sewn us, according
to the photo I no longer have, and cannot remember
whether is the source or confirmation
of this memory: only the papery, gray-green
streaks of road dust on the canes, a bowl
of chipped porcelain inside of which
were raspberries. Very red, very sweet, furred
like my friend's upper lip I remember
between my teeth as we stood
on the docks. The smell
of iron and winter mist, her mouth
like nothing I have tasted since.

Paisley Rekdal

⁷⁵ Paisley Rekdal, "At the Fishhouses," in *Poetry*, collected in *Imaginary Vessels*, Copper Canyon

Departures

Go on and make a bed in the grass
Go on and cup the face of the deer in your hands

Go on

Too much is sacred; I sing a small night song in the refrigerator's glow I pray
for the angels to stop coming but I know they will always come and pray instead
for a very good place to hide, for a magic trick I can do with
scarves and a nickel

Go and bleed somewhere else not on the couch for god's sake

A red plastic bird, its paint worn away,
whistled from the chain

of our kitchen's chandelier
and only my father could reach it.

Wire feet he wound onto the links

Something special about the bird—
its cause and effect,

the way he made it call

Go away, this is my space behind the winter coats

Go away, this is my cardboard box

you cannot come inside

Christmas, black ice in the headlines;

Dusk, and the small bulbs blink on in the trees

Dusk, and the bar's neon gives
a little sigh—

windows lit, the streets wet, the looking in while jingling a little change in your pocket then turning away

Sophie Klahr

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⁷⁶ [Sophie Klahr](#), "[Departures](#)," collected in [Meet Me Here at Dawn](#), [Yes Yes](#)

Catalogue Entry for Aging

The night we met, I contracted a childhood disease.
The discoloration resembled that of turmeric or a fig tree.
I measured the color's expansive, wide distance: Inner thigh to the edge of the mattress.

Tonight, a man on the phone poses an inquiry re: two boxes of books by Leon Trotsky.
I cover the mouthpiece, laugh with my co-worker.

Dear Sir or Madam: I am stunned by how easy it is to be a Very Bad Person.

Claire Donato

⁷⁷ [Claire Donato](#), "[Catalogue Entry for Aging](#)," in [Harp & Altar](#), collected in [The Second Body](#), [Poor Claudia](#)

Anti-Eclogue

I woke up to the cat eating the phone. Poised on the edge of the bed like a little yogini.

My friend calls to tell me she's having an affair with a married woman. Then my father calls to say he's reading *The Brothers Karamazov*. He's a big Dostoyevsky fan now, can't get enough of the murder and betrayal. Later in the day a student complains, "it's always about sex," and "if you walked around thinking everyone was fixated on sex like Freud says they are, it would just be so funny."

When I was a kid I'd go to the woods to smoke cinnamon sticks. The exact length and girth of a cigarette but of course they don't draw, so pulling too hard makes you lose your breath. October brings it back to me: the smell of wood fire, the color of wet. It's the crudest month, with all due respect—a month of anniversaries I'd rather not mark, and now, last in the chain, a year since the day that was meant to redeem a season but took the other way instead. Fall in the fullest sense of the word, transgressions and falling in love and falling apart and falling down drunk. You fall to your knees. You fall flat on your face. A shadow falls across the page. A wisp of hair falls into your eyes I once sang Patsy Kline's "I Fall to Pieces" to a friend for his birthday. He laughed at first but when he realized I was seriously serenading him, he got a look of wonder on his face and I could see him come to his senses, literally, as an act of mindfulness. Later I fell for a guy because he showed me phlox in the real world, because he made them real, not the shibboleth of poets like *timothy* or *light*.

My grandmother died in October, and my first love left, and then another, and one more. Losses that stack up like couch cushions. Bereft: to be robbed of a loved one. To be plundered in love.

When I rolled over to answer the phone (it was him calling, the man of phlox and sweet William and broom) the cat fell off the bed, making a mewling sound. And that's why I proposed to him—because of course, internal gyroscope and all, cats don't fall so much as twist. Because we came home one night to a toad on the front walk and he knew it wasn't a frog. Because they're both right, Freud and my student—that desire, like pain, reduces everything to itself, and if we didn't find that a little bit funny, we'd fall over backward under the strain of our wishing. Waterfalls. Falling stars.

Susannah Mintz

⁷⁸ Susannah Mintz, "[Anti-Eclogue](#)," collected in [The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry](#), [Rose Metal Press](#)

A Little Cough Syrup

I tell Richard, my 403(b) guy, that I want to make a change
in my deferred-compensation plan, and he says,
“Let me give you that 800 number so you can call the California office,”
because, he says, if he’s had a little cough syrup that day,

he could make a mistake that, thirty years from now,
would have a client eating Alpo right out of the can,
like not even able to buy a dog dish in the big, mysterious,
and, for that reason, scary future waiting out there somewhere

and connected to each of us by a line along which are scattered
all the things we think we can overcome when we are as young
as I, *poseur* and shit-for-brains, was thirty years earlier
in the chest-high gray trousers and tight purple shirt

I’d just bought at a *bodega* in Spanish Harlem, though the guy
I look like isn’t me, is, instead, a New Yorker, tough guy
full of street smarts, not a sixteen-year-old hick from Baton Rouge, LA,
on his way back from a summer job on Cape Cod and stopping now

in the city with his friend Bertrand to make a little gas money
for the trip home, Bertrand passing out flyers for an electronics shop
and me washing cars until I get fired for pulling off a customer’s skirt
with the vacuum cleaner and decide to spend my pay on my idea

of what a city kid wears, i.e., Shark-and-Jet attire, right down to
the aptly named “fence-climbers” on my feet, an ensemble Nuyorican
and therefore totally outlandish on my blond and freckled body,
but, hell, I don’t want my body anymore, don’t want to have anything to do

with anyone from Baton Rouge, including myself, except Bertrand,
who apparently has a relative in every second city we pass through,
such as the man-mountain uncle in Dayton we stop in on a week later
at seven in the morning and who speaks in a series of heh-heh chuckles

punctuated by an occasional phrase and who is just about to sit down
to a platter of at least a dozen fried eggs and maybe twice as many
tomato slices, all of which he gives to us, saying, A-heh-heh-heh,
dig in, boys, heh-heh-heh-heh, plenty more where that came from,

a-heh, a-heh-heh-heh, and at first I think he is laughing
at my fab Puerto Rican vines, which he isn’t, and at that moment
I want to be, not a New York street kid anymore,
but a huge happy glutton, someone as much above it all

as the emperor Sigismund we studied in Latin II who, having made an error in speech and been corrected by a cardinal, replied, *Ego sum rex Romanus et super grammatica*, or, I am king of Rome and above grammar, meaning, of course, the ablative and the pluperfect,

though what I am beginning to suspect on this long trip from the Cape to my mother's kitchen again is that each life has its own grammar and that there is no point in trying to transcend yours by being somebody else, that if you are alive at all, you are essentially

in the same position I'd been in two days earlier in New Jersey at the Palisades Park I'd insisted we visit because of the song of that name by Freddie "Boom Boom" Cannon and where I soon find myself spinning dizzily on the Tilt-a-Whirl and feeling

this terrible pain in the back of my head, and when I resist the centrifugal force long enough to lift myself and look around, I see that everybody else has a head pad, though mine has fallen off, and the Tilt-a-Whirl guy is too cheap to replace it, or maybe

he'd just taken a little cough syrup that day, the result being that a rusty bolt is boring into my skull, and though I manage to pull away from time to time, sooner or later my head snaps back and, pow, I get another grammar lesson.

* * *

You don't even need to take that syrup to mess up a life, your own or someone else's: the first day on the job I now have, sweetest little old lady is the only person on duty in the personnel office, and there are two new hires there,

me and a guy with a full beard and hair out to here, and the old lady says if it's okay with us, she'll tell us both about our retirement options at the same time, and I say okay, and the crazy-haired guy just sort of bristles, and the sweet old lady says, "Now, Doctuh Kirby, we have

two retah-ment plans heah at Flah-da State, and the first does blah-blah, while the second does blah-blah-blah, and which one do you want?" And I say I'll take the one she recommends, and she says, "You have made a ve'y fine choice," and then she turns to Grizzly Adams

and says, "Now how 'bout you, professuh," and he says— and remember, this is 1969—"I don't give a fuck, it's all a bunch of capitalist bullshit anyway, just put me in whichever fucking one you want!" and the old lady smiles the sweetest smile and says,

"Ve'y well!" and makes mark on his form, and I imagine her going home that evening and having Old Fashioned and some crackers and rat cheese on the patio with her husband and saying, "Henruh, I met the rudest young man today," and I also imagine young Doctor Sasquatch

hobbling back into personnel when he's seventy, and the person on duty says he can't explain it, but for some reason there don't seem to be funds deposited into that particular account, and he's mad all over again but it's, like, Milk-Bone time for him.

* * *

The last night before we get back to Baton Rouge, we pull off the highway somewhere near Marksville or Cottonport because Bertrand remembers another set of relatives, his father's great-uncle and family who live on the bayou in this big sprawling house, and the great-uncle is dead,

though the great-aunt is alive, as is her mother and, incredibly, her grandmother, who must be three thousand years old and who, far from having undergone the traditional desiccation of old age, has, over the years, fattened to a bulk that, along with her refusal

to utter a word, lends a certain mystique to her in the eyes of two teenaged boys, Bertrand and his Nuyorican fashion-plate friend, who are welcomed as though expected and given étouffée and jambalaya and cornbread and ice cream with sliced peaches and bottle after cold,

sweaty bottle of Dixie 45 and made to tell their stories and to listen to those to the others, most which center around a family member named Uncle Junior who blows stumps for a living and who was complaining that very day about a helper who had left a screwdriver

on an oak stump and retreated to what he thought was a safe distance, though when the charge went off, the helper caught the tool "right in the brisket," according to Junior, and had to be trucked to the clinic at Junior's expense, "and that was a brand-new screwdriver, too."

Then off to bed, which, for me, is a cot on the screen porch, where I lie awake for a long time and listen to the tree frogs singing and the nutrias splashing and the bull alligators doing that throaty roar they do when they're looking for wives and, once, the child's scream

a rabbit makes when an owl's got him, and then I doze a while and wake and sleep again and finally wake for good just as the morning light begins to come through the cypress trees, that dull blue glow that arrives a half hour before the sun itself, and when I open my eyes,

the great aunt's enormous grandmother is standing by the cot, still dressed the way she'd been the night before, and staring down at me, her eyes wet and bulging in the dimness like those of some creature who has come up out of the swamp for God knows what evil purpose.

My own eyes snap shut again instantly, and I lie there a good forty-five minutes, venturing an occasional peep at this crazy old Cajun lady looming over me like my future, huge, silent, unfathomable, and then, suddenly, gone, having disappeared noiselessly between peeps. “Bertrand,” I say, having

found him in a sleeping bag on the kitchen floor and now vigorously shaking his shoulder, “we’ve got to get out of here,” and, sure enough, find myself that very night in my parents’ house again, and as the days go by, moving half-aware into preparation for my senior year

and the coming break when I go away to college and all the things I have to think about and do and all the advice my folks are giving me so I won’t make the same mistakes they made, though why shouldn’t I, since I love them and want to be like them and will, whether I want to

or no, fuse the grammar of their lives with my own so far, as well as the parts that haven’t been written yet, the half-formed subjects and predicates still roiling in the ooze of the yet-to-come, our Caliban lives at once unutterable and frail.

David Kirby

⁷⁹ David Kirby, “[A Little Cough Syrup](#),” collected in [The House of Blue Light](#), [LSU](#)

Grandmothers

Where does it all begin?
God is good; woman bleeds.
It was the depression or before.
You were cooking over an open
greasy fire and the house burned
to the ground. And you were cutting
the heads off chickens and laughing
at the horror of them walking backward
and dancing. And you were slitting
the throats of two-hundred-pound hogs.
And keeping your future husband
from priesthood with seven children.
You showed me my stuffed puppy
legs in the air. *He's dead!* you said.
Or you were a little girl with an iron
and a board for Christmas. You learned
to drive stick in a field. And you gave
birth to father jumping off trains
or you gave birth to mother
who only gave birth to two.
You were a witch, our house
adorned with dead animals,
fish curling to free themselves
from the wall.

Jennie Malboeuf

⁸⁰ Jennie Malboeuf, "[Grandmothers](#)," collected in [Best New Poets 2016](#), [University of Virginia](#)

Abort / Retry?

Because sometimes she's more fishflesh than sexbot.
Because an empty body is not subject to the laws

of gravity. Or addiction. She stuttered upon ignition,
fell mute. Her doll-pupils blank and blown.

Because this version is more chimerical than intended.
The systematic removal of her organs reveals rust,

bovine pathology, serpentine viscera. This model
brings to mind words like lesion, trauma.

Because there is a fetus in her thorax,
and proper placement is essential to evolution.

Because a wrench is labeled love device.

Susan Slaviero

⁸¹ [Susan Slaviero](#), "[Abort / Retry](#)," collected in [Cyborgia](#), [Mayapple](#)

Antibody

I've heard that blood will always tell:
tell me then, antigen, declining white cell count
answer, who wouldn't die for beauty
if he could? Microbe of mine, you don't have me
in mind. (The man fan-dancing from 1978
hit me with a feather's edge across the face, ghost
of a kiss. It burned.) Men who have paid
their brilliant bodies for soul's desire, a night
or hour, fifteen minutes of skin brushed against
bright skin, burn down to smoke and cinders
shaken over backyard gardens, charred
bone bits sieved out over water. The flat earth
loves them even contaminated, turned over
for no one's spring. Iris and gentian
spring up like blue flames, discard those parts
more perishable: lips, penises, testicles,
a lick of semen on the tongue, and other things
in the vicinity of sex. Up and down the sidewalk
stroll local gods (see also: saunter, promenade,
parade of possibilities, virtues at play: Sunday
afternoons before tea dance, off-white
evenings kneeling at public urinals, consumed
by what confuses, consuming it
too). Time in its burn is any
life, those hours, afternoons, buildings
smudged with soot and city residues. Later
they take your blood, that tells secrets
it doesn't know, bodies can refuse
their being such, rushing into someone's
wish not to be. My babbling blood.
What's left of burning
burns as well: me down to blackened
glass, an offering in anthracite,
the darkest glitter smoldering underground
until it consumes the earth
which loves me anyway, I'm sure.

Reginald Shepherd

⁸² Reginald Shepherd, "[Antibody](#)," collected in [Wrong](#), [University of Pittsburgh](#)

Seven for Today

1. My son called 911 this morning (again). He was supposed to be listening to his Ramona audiobook on headphones so I could sleep for another twenty minutes, but he fiddled with the locked phone until it made an emergency call, then he handed it to me. “Here, you talk.” I opened my eyes to see what he'd done, then panicked and hung up. They called back a minute later. “No, no emergency. Just my three year-old. Sorry.”
2. I ask a friend to tell me to write 500 words. She tells me to write 500 words. I pick up a favorite book, Abigail Thomas's *Safekeeping*, to remember about writing, about narrative windows into a life. I read about Thomas's second divorce. “There were no happy answers,” she writes. I read a sad part about how her parents paid for her son to go away to boarding school, and he called her, homesick, begging to come home. She writes, “Some things are so sad you think they can't get better and nothing will be ok. She didn't make it better, although she tried, later. It got better by itself.”
3. Yesterday we went to the playground for the hour before sundown. My son keeps asking me if it's still winter. I say that it is, even though some of the days have been unseasonably warm. Yesterday was Groundhog Day. The beginning of February is also Imbolc. The park we go to is a sort of oval basin of lawn with stone steps at one end. We run into three girls from preschool there, two of whom are twins. The non-twin really wants E. to play with her, and she crouches beside him as he stuffs old leaves into the bottom of an overturned riding toy. “Elias, do you want to play wedding? Do you want to play wedding, Elias??” Finally, with some prompting from me, he replies, “I want to play digging.” Later, he tries to join his friends as they climb up one structure and hop onto another on repeatedly. One of the twins tells him the game is only for girls.
4. Before we leave the playground, E. becomes increasingly tired and hungry. I can see it in how he begins to roam around, looking for opportunities to be belligerent. I try to coax him toward the car with the promise of peanut butter crackers, but it's only when I distract him by pointing to the clouds that he agrees to be picked up. “Are they stratus or cumulus?” he says. I'm not sure. Stratus, maybe. “All clouds are made of water vapor,” he tells me.
5. I've been very angry, I tell my friend over text. So have I, he says. And it's slipping out in the wrong places. Yeah, I say.
6. This morning after the 911 call, my son wanders into the kitchen to oversee the coffee making. It is his job to smell the coffee after it is ground, and he becomes agitated if he misses the chance to do it. I try to doze again, but find that I am agitated. Is it an emergency? I say a spontaneous “Hail Mary.” I'm not Catholic, but I've always loved Mary, and I like the idea of “hailing” her. “Hail, Mary. Come in, Mary. Over.” By the time I am at the end of the prayer, my body has relaxed. May we all be cared for. All of us poor sinners. All of us who care for others. Now and at the hour of our death.
7. What I wanted to say was that there were all kinds of people at the playground. I stood over my son, watching him stuff leaves into an overturned toy with another boy as they made “dragon soup,” and I thought, “This is America. *This* is America. *This is* America.”

Joanna Penn Cooper

The Teenage Girl Understands

*Remember, there are other ways
that men can touch you, my mother said.*

I thought of the man who pushed
his thigh against mine
on the bus, said *how are you still fifteen—*

but she meant
so they don't get you pregnant.

When she told me about men,
my mother began her sentences
Understand. Remember.

We've all failed our mothers once.

On his mother's couch, my mouth
filled with him, and I remembered

as a young child, my face slammed
against that first heavy wave:

how the brine filled my body
like a bag.

Understand that his cock
became the shape of my mouth
and claimed it. That night

he rocked my rigid neck
between his hands until
it locked. I ate nothing

but my work, spat him warm
into the sink.

If I told her I decided to marry
the first man who asked me

is this how you like to be touched,
my mother would understand.

Rachel Mennies

The White Fires of Venus

We mourn this senseless planet of regret,
droughts, rust, rain, cadavers
that can't tell us, but I promise
you one day the white fires
of Venus shall rage: the dead,
feeling that power, shall be lifted, and each
of us will have his resurrected one to tell him,
"Greetings. You will recover
or die. The simple cure
for everything is to destroy
all the stethoscopes that will transmit
silence occasionally. The remedy for loneliness
is in learning to admit
the bayonet: gracefully,
now that already
it pierces the heart.
Living one: you move among many
dancers and don't know which
you are the shadow of;
you want to kiss your own face in the mirror
but do not approach,
knowing you must not touch one
like that. Living
one, while Venus flares
O set the cereal afire,
O the refrigerator harboring things
that live on into death unchanged."

They know all about us on Andromeda,
they peek at us, they see us
in this world illumined and pasteled
phonily like a bus station,
they are with us when the streets fall down fraught
with laundromats and each of us
closes himself in his small
San Francisco without recourse.
They see you with your face of fingerprints
carrying your instructions in gloved hands
trying to touch things, and know you
for one despairing, trying to touch the curtains,
trying to get your reflection mired in alarm tape
past the window of this then that dark
closed business establishment.
The Andromedans hear your voice like distant amusement park rides
converged on by ambulance sirens
and they understand everything.
They're on your side. They forgive you.

I want to turn for a moment to those my heart loves,
who are as diamonds to the Andromedans,
who shimmer for them, lovely and useless, like diamonds:
namely, those who take their meals at soda fountains,
their expressions lodged among the drugs
and sunglasses, each gazing down too long
into the coffee as though from a ruined balcony.
O Andromedans they don't know what to do
with themselves and so they sit there
until they go home where they lie down
until they get up, and you beyond the light years know
that if sleeping is dying, then waking
is birth, and a life
is many lives. I love them because they know how
to manipulate change
in the pockets musically, these whose faces the seasons
never give a kiss, these
who are always courteous to the faces
of presumptions, the presuming streets,
the hotels, the presumption of rain in the streets.
I'm telling you it's cold inside the body that is not the body,
lonesome behind the face
that is certainly not a face
of the person one meant to become.

Denis Johnson

⁸⁵ Denis Johnson, "[The White Fires of Venus](#)," in [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [The Incognito Lounge](#), [Carnegie Mellon University](#)

My Hair is My Thing

The symphony's out of money again, and no wonder: all those violins, the twisted strands and sponges—who could not think of torture? Last week I read a novel about a man so awful that when he died I wept because it was fiction. I wanted it to be real so that he could really die. I wanted you to die also, and to be feted with a lengthy, organza-filled funeral, so that I could make a big show of blowing it off. I decided to go out and get a tattoo of your funeral with me not there, but apparently it's illegal here to tattoo a person who's crying. The trend now is to be interred with beloved possessions: pearl-trimmed gun, gold watch, whatever you've got. Some people recoil at the waste of it, but not me. These contused little objects of wealth—they're disgusting. I just pray we have earth and shovels enough. I pray we have bodies enough to bury them all.

Natalie Shapero

Letter, Clip

If you go back far enough in my family tree there are birds.
—Susan Mitchell

1.
Susan, if I had your ovaries,
I'd summon a homing pigeon

to deliver the plague. I'd sweep
feathers from the sidewalk

until I had a coffin or a pillow.
It's not that I want you

dead, but yesterday, lying
on a picnic table

at a rest stop in Virginia,
all those syndicated symbols

of hope flocked straight
to a forest of Dutch Elm disease.

2.
Susan, when I was you,
I let my breasts dangle.

I let the sand crabs creep
across my painted toes.

I asked the moon to drop
her stole of embittered light

so as to lead no one else astray.
For moral support,

I strung a hammock
between pine trees—

a family of nooses
holding hands.

3.
Susan, high in the canopy,
a warbler sings and spreads

its communicable disease.
Below, pine needles

stifle the undergrowth.
Yesterday, I left my hollow

bones in the womb.
Today, I stand enormously

still. Like the ash tree
shading the crematorium,

I willow, but I cannot weep.

4.
Susan, if I am God,
there are so many reasons

to worry. All I ask
is that you suffer

with me.

Fritz Ward

Bust

I'm driving alone in the pre-dawn
dark to the airport, nerves nearly gone
when I fly now, gravity only another holy
thing to contend with, what pushes us
down squeezing out the body's air.
The shock jock's morning jawing clangs
in its exaggerated American male register
to tell us how the 24-year-old Colombian
woman whose breasts had been hacked
open and stuffed with one kilogram
of cocaine swiftly admitted the smuggled
property because she was in dire agony.
Wounds rupturing, raging infection,
she was rushed to the Berlin hospital.
Her three kids were home in her country
where she worked in agriculture, another
word for cultivation of land, for making
something out of dirt. The rude radio
disc jockey licks his lips into the studio's mic
and says something about motor boating
her tits jammed with nose candy and I'm
thinking of my friend who's considering
a mastectomy to stay alive, another who
said she'd cut them off herself if it meant
living. Passport and boots that slip on and off,
a sleepy stream through the radiation
machine. A passive pat down of my outline
and I'm heading somewhere else before
the world has even woken up. I've got shit
to do and I need to lose a little weight before
I turn older. There's the email scan of the bank
statement showing barely enough, the IRS
check, the dentist that'll have to wait until
payday next month. We do what we have
to do to not cleave the body too quickly.
I wait for my zone to be called and line
up with all the others, the woman's voice
over the intercom's buzz reminding us
the flight is full, reminding us to carry
only what we need. The chill rises
up in the jet bridge as does the tremor
in my chest as we board, this shiver of need
that moves my hand to my breastbone,
some small gesture of tenderness for this
masterpiece of anatomy I cling to.

Ada Limón

Jingle

Whenever I pick up the hammer
in the empty music room
I hit the dead key
on the xylophone.

*

Embolism. Shy eruption.

What is thunder?
God plugging in the razor.
Where is father?

Where isn't he?

*

When I was young
if I heard a number,
any number, I had to count

up to it, to say it,
to know for sure.

*

Little dither. Endless weather.
What did father say?

It takes your whole life
to die.

*

What is thunder?
God trying
not to lie.

Gregory Lawless

Tango (Cinema Sex Ed)

the come-hither glance the head thrown back
the table dance the predatory advance
the meal ticket out the reclining on the couch
the pair of aces split the feigned indifference
bikini and cape the narrow escape
the billowy curtain the ruggedly handsome
center stage the expanse of her leg
surf crashing around them on the edge of the bed
hot on the scent they spin as one, the wheel of roulette
the manner to which she is accustomed the object undetected

Catherine Bowman

⁹⁰ Catherine Bowman, "[Tango \(Cinema Sex Ed\)](#)," collected in [Can I Finish, Please?](#), [Four Way Books](#)

Twilight, Starring Kanye

The vampires are who everybody
wants in their movies right now, but who knows
what new creature we'll see ourselves kissing. I'm
thinking the next one won't idealize a
white man, but maybe those motherfucking
types go on forever. What monster

has such sparkling *black* skin? What monster
has sparkling black skin but everybody
can find him more man than motherfucking
beast, can still desire him, godlike, knows
it's safe for their sweet daughters to have a
cutout of him in their sweet bedrooms. I'm

not thinking of zombie Michael. I'm
thinking the black man can't be a monster
because he is one, because we won't let a
fantasy form around him. Everybody
has at least one dream where the city knows
it's in trouble. And it's the motherfucking

dreamer who has a foot on motherfucking
towers, people, and cars and shit. Or I'm
hoping I'm not the only one. God knows
there's room for one sweating, flexing monster
in my head. And it's everybody
else who's walking by and flickering a

bit on the street, just waiting for a
person like me to ask, "What monster
would you be? Land or sea? Could everybody
love you like that?" Somewhere on the street, I'm
yelling, "You can't make every monster
into sexy Halloween costumes." Kanye knows

why fantasy exists, and stories, knows
how to make women look dead and fill a
room with them. And he's called a monster.
I should be in love with motherfucking
Edward Cullen I guess. I guess I'm
a fool to love Kanye. And everybody

can just freak when "#####
#####" too.

Sarah Blake

⁹¹ Sarah Blake, "Twilight, Starring Kanye," collected in [Mr. West](#), [Wesleyan](#)

Ad Infinitum

The sex was never-ending
and beautiful like a billion poppies blowing
over the graves and empty houses
and the explosion in the distance

was beautiful like a billion poppies blowing
toward the east trying to escape the west
and the explosion in the distance
worked in our favor as you bent me over

toward the east trying to escape the west
and the pounding and the pounding
working in our favor as you bent me over
like thunder and rain, a black blizzard, a charged sky

and the pounding and the pounding
like an orgasm to wake all neighboring armies:
like thunder and rain, a black blizzard, a charged sky
I heard myself coming until my throat was sore

like an orgasm to wake all neighboring armies
or the hard slap on a woman's round ass
I heard myself coming until my throat was sore
from screaming over the loud machines

or the hard slap on a woman's round ass
committed by a soldier on leave, a soldier gone AWOL
from screaming over the loud machines
saving his supply of butter and cinnamon for my nipples

suckled by a soldier on leave, a soldier gone AWOL
the one missing two fingers
licking his supply of butter and cinnamon from my nipples
because this is how we keep going

the one missing two fingers
pulling apart our clothes under the battle-broken sky
because this is how we keep going
like the atom eternally splitting

pulling apart our clothes under the century-long sky
the sex was never-ending
like the eternally splitting atom
over the graves and empty houses.

Tana Jean Welch

⁹² [Tana Jean Welch](#), "Ad Infinitum," in [Beloit Poetry Journal](#), collected in [Latest Volcano](#), [Marsh Hawk](#)

it's that time of year ice in the trees
 snow like dirty light piled beside the trash bags
 city gardens behind chain-link fences
 mired in white except for an occasional rat
 everyone lately has cancer
 Philip Seymour Hoffman is dead of an overdose
 everyone's sad & fascinated
 black night is falling in a song
 I prefer the one about the glowworm
 illuminate yon woods primeval
 come to bed my aeronautical glimmer
 draw a treble clef a few notes will swoop down
 nothing lasts anyway
 & we leave nothing behind

Kim Addonizio

Dead Year

I remember someone calling
my name. I remember cutting
all my hair in the heat
and wanting to nest in it.
What am I to do in a year
that won't let me sink
further? Algorithm
or logarithm, I don't
remember which
makes me crawl up
the stairs backwards.
Have you noticed
the numb in my face
yet? I am most happy
in photos alone.
I am having a little
miscarriage for myself.
I guess you should know
there is a minor difference
between this hemorrhage
and the silver spoon
I jam down your throat.

Anne Cecelia Holmes

A Brief Attachment

I regard your affections, find your teeth have
left me a bruise necklace. Those lipstick
marks leech a trail, ear to ear, facsimile your
smile. Your 40 ounces of malt liquor, your
shrink hate, your eyes dialing 911. The hearts
you draw with ballpoint on my cigarette packs
when I've left the room, penned in your girl's

cursive, look demented, misshapen approximations
of what I refuse to hand over. It's a nice touch,
though: a little love to accompany the cancer.
My thought follows you to where you spend
your days lying in bed, smoking and reading
the Beats. The accumulation of clothes and ashes
circles you, rising like a moat after rainfall.

Often you are a study in detachment—the trigger
eye is your eye, still as a finger poised to press
should one refuse to cooperate, and I wonder
how you can hate men so much when you think
like one. Think of what I could be doing outside
if I could unlock the door of myself: think bikini,
think soda fountain, think tradition, a day lacking

entirely your brand of ambivalence. If you were
a number, I'd subtract you; if you were a sentence,
I'd rewrite you. Are you the one who left these
wilted flowers, are you the one whose PIN spells
out H-O-L-E? Why are you wearing my clothes?
If you are weather, then I am a town, closing down
at word of your coming: you're a glacier on fast

forward, you're direct as a detour, when I say
good-bye you move in next door. You say you
want to have my baby, you want to buy me a car,
and you're too young to enter a bar. I should tether
you to a tree in the dark park, allow the moon to stroke
your white neck. I should give you a diamond collar,
walk you around the block and show you off.

Cate Marvin

A Picture is Worth Eight Hundred and Eighty-Seven Words

Her name was Alison. Alison or Beatrice. Beatrice or Hiacinth. Like the flower but not spelled like the flower. I'm not one of those guys who forgets women's names. I'm one of those guys who's distracted, in this particular constellation of memory, by having taken a picture of my penis long ago that did not include my penis. Things were going well with Alison or Beatrice or Hiacinth, so well we knew we'd make love soon, or to wax pronounly, we knew we were going to do it. But Alison or Beatrice or Hiacinth was very honest and very smart and very shy and very hurt at least once, for she had the idea that we each take a picture of our naked selves and share these photographic confessions. That way, if one of us didn't like what we saw, we could demur without rejecting actual flesh, actual maybe sagging or strangely asymmetrical or gothically tattooed flesh, in the moment of its unveiling, that phase of a relationship that should be accompanied by the phrase, *Ta-Da*. I loved the idea, the overwhelming sense of photo-realism it would add to my life, but when I stripped, brought the camera to eye and aimed it at the mirror, I laughed, laughed and thought, *Johnson, wang, schlong, puddle rudder, meatcycle*, and noticed once more that the penis, especially the flaccid penis, appears to be what God was working on when the phone rang. So I tucked it between my legs and snapped away. In tucking it away I was tucking away the absurdity of language and the organ's significant lack of utility in its casual state of existence. It was a whim, honestly, not an admission of a secret wardrobe or dimensional concerns, and knowing Alison or Beatrice or Hiacinth as I thought I did, I felt she'd find it cute, endearing even. That one day, we'd tell our oldest child, when we were secretly stoned, just to make her blush, to make him vomit in his brain. But. After the date when we exchanged envelopes, I never heard from Alison OR Beatrice OR Hiacinth, whose picture, by the way, revealed not only a beautiful woman, but also a fine sense of composition, due largely to the Van Gogh print behind her left shoulder that suggested she was, among other things, a starry night. Minutes to hours to days to weeks, time did what it does that makes us compare it to sand and water and really old people in orthopedic shoes. When I couldn't take it anymore, couldn't abide that she ignored my calls and wouldn't ring me up, and accepted that I didn't want to be a stalker, as lovely

as the lifestyle sounds, I did what anyone would do
who once attempted to unfreeze a gas cap with a lighter.
I bought a tube of lipstick—Cherries Jubilee, I think,
because of course a lipstick called Cherries Jubilee
would be cheap and noticeable—and wrote
on her windshield, I HAVE A PENIS. If you're thinking,
a note would have done, a letter, a message
on her answering machine, some skywriting even
would have been better, I have only this to say:
you obviously have a frontal lobe, whereas I
would need to drill down for proof before I'd commit
to having such a gray possession as that. So I'd written
in large letters what I never thought I'd have reason
to write, when this woman, this older woman in sensible
everything—sensible coat and shoes and hat and skin,
I found her skin eminently sensible in how it held
the parts of her that were supposed to be inside
inside—stopped and gave a little tug on her dog,
her dachshund I want to say, probably
because I had a dachshund as a child. Snippy
the miniature dachshund, which even at ten
seemed redundant, for I saw no especially large dachshunds,
no Godzilla dachshunds I needed to worry about
distinguishing from the lesser dachshunds, she stopped
and gave a tug on her dog and read what I'd written
in my frankly impressive block letters, I was and remain
quite legible, whether confessing I have a penis
or writing on the whiteboard on the fridge, EGGS,
PEACE OF MIND, so my wife and I won't forget
what we want from life, she was there and leaning
toward the windshield, the dog leaning
the way dogs do when people stop, as if they know
it's a mistake for living organisms to stop, ever,
she leaned and looked at the windshield, at me,
at the windshield, at me, and whispered
very softly, as if her lips were tiptoeing,
as if her voice were a match in a room of gasoline,
So do I. And smiled. The best smile I'd ever seen.
A smile that made me think she'd waited her whole life
to admit this to someone on the street, someone
with obviously a few things to work on. That became
the Cheshire smile, the smile that hangs in the air, that follows
and gives me the feeling I can yet be who I am.
And her name was Alison. Alison. Alison. Like the song.
The beautiful song I'm singing as I type this,
singing in my head, where I'm a wonderful singer,
as are we all.

Bob Hicok

⁹⁶ Bob Hicok, "[A Picture is Worth Eight Hundred and Eighty-Seven Words](#)," in [The Southern Review](#), collected in [Sex & Love & Copper Canyon](#)

Sir or Madam

after Jean-Pierre Rosnay

Because I know also well though you should not have been permitted to enter through the radiation.

Because maybe I have all forgotten but I know well though you should not have brought the ticket even though you fear you will be unable to procure one at the portal.

Because maybe you have also forgotten the hospital where you had been barred to see the radiation.

But, if we speak of the hospital, should we remember it as the place where if we shrink, and we shudder, that's normal?

Because I know also well though you had been cautioned year upon year while migrating towards the hospital.

Because I know also though you had tried to scale the ingress in the hospital at the efficient hour.

Because I know though your migrating had not been permitted to enter through the radiation.

Because I know you will go like a specter who has made fault in the grass, your tongue flailing near the defeated planet, near it, yes, near but not it.

Because of time in time I know though, for you, the hospital is the hospital at the interior of the man, and that is astonishingly difficult there to operate.

Valerie Hsiung

What I Miss Most about Hell

is prayer.
I'd pack a plastic bottle

with vodka, drive
to the crag of my life—

the parking lot of a pancake house—
and scream. I prayed

like everyone I loved was on fire.
The bright, violet blob

I called God
would forgive the atrocities

roared in ethanol rage
while I'd shake like a dog

demanding answers
from the maker of figs:

why the sycamore fruit
sweetens only when bruised,

the way a fist will
ripen a child.

Eugenia Leigh

Among Competing Answers, Choose the Simplest

I'm straightening up the house while Robin's on the phone with her brother who's walking her through the steps to find the arrest report of her other brother. It looks like it's three charges this time, but one of them isn't available for viewing, which gets confusing, in the cacophony of birds dissipating from tree to tree way, which is also a version of that feeling you have when you aren't having any feelings in a situation in which you think you should be having feelings. But numbness is also a feeling, as I'm looking things up on the internet to try to help, even though I was just thinking that's a rather futile task. If we refused every futile task, though, we'd do very little in this life, I'm countering to myself, as Robin and her brother are wondering if their brother had been taking his medications and how that might've been a part of it. And haven't we had this conversation before, arguing against our current conception of empathy, that it's too easily swayed by individuals in crisis and not enough by long-term goals? It's important that we follow the terms of grief. That we wrap the wound in gauze and pick up our drums and flutes. It reminds me of an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, where Riker gets turned into a god, and loses his capacity for empathy, fried, as he was, by the weight of his power. Where do we start is the same question as where do we stop. Like most things, it depends on your phrasing. You campaign, as they say, in poetry, and you govern in prose. No wonder then, that people say poetry is dead. For years after my first divorce, I kept my wedding ring on my keychain, as poetry, a reminder of something, a negotiation with myself. Some empathy. I was never very specific regarding what I was supposed to be reminding myself of, or negotiating. I think maybe I just didn't know what to do with it, really, until one day I was at work and someone stole my keys, wanting the ring, to pawn or to, I guess, marry someone. So then I got this second lesson, a lesson about the surface-level reality of one's lessons, and I tell this story often because I think it's funny, though no one else ever does, which makes it even more funny.

John Gallaher

⁹⁹ John Gallaher, "[Among Competing Answers, Choose the Simplest](#)," in [The Los Angeles Review](#)

1.

I will publish a book by the time I'm 30.

2.

April, June, September, November.

3.

Breasts or chests and an empty stomach lying on their side.

4.

At age 30 my mother gave birth to me. Of five children, I'm the middle. Her favorite. The oldest son of my generation. I chose to not have offspring.

5.

I turned 30 on November 26, 2001. New York City still smelled of ash.

6.

An omen of blackbirds roosting on electrical wire.

7.

For the very first time I fell in love with a man.

8.

Every morning I count the almonds I drop in my oatmeal.

9.

There are 30 hours in a day, minus six, which I could totally use.

10.

Taylor Swift sings of young abandon in "22" (ooh-ooh). That I abandoned.

11.

I detest the rock band Thirty Seconds to Mars despite not having heard their music. Leto is forever Catalano to me.

12.

Space Station Expedition 30 Soyuz Capsule landed in Kazakhstan. A friend adopted a cherubic boy from a Kazakhstan orphanage. Renamed him Julien. He now resembles his French-Polish father.

13.

My sole brother's birthday is May 30. I often fail him.

14.

Forgiveness has proven to be the hardest lesson.

15.

Fifteen is halfway there. There is halfway to sixty.

16.

Adulthood prances nowhere near a New Yorker in his 30s.

17.

If I run on a treadmill for 30 minutes, I'll burn a cupcake. Or two.

18.

I met a lion-maned sorceress, wearing a glittery sweater. We ate dim sum. Went on adventures.

19.

The last TV show I regarded as religion was "30 Rock."

20.

In many parts of the world 30 chickens constitute wealth.

21.

Zero Dark Thirty is military slang for the unspecified time in the early morning hours before dawn.

22.

"-30-" was the title of the final episode of the final season of "The Wire."

23.

In *The Seasons of a Man's Life*, psychologist Daniel J. Levinson defines "The Dream"—youth, illusion, inspiration, omnipotence, heroic drama—and how it needs to be modulated during the transition period (28-33) of early adulthood. For survival.

24.

I aged out of “30 Under 30.”

25.

At the end of a press release, the end of a story.

26.

In a clearing, a sawed-off tree. I count its rings. History.

27.

“–30–” was a telegraphic shorthand to “end transmission” in the American Civil War.

28.

My roommate and I rushed to our Manhattan rooftop and saw a tower downtown crumble into smoke and nothing.

29.

When my knee inadvertently touched his at a poetry reading, he moved not a muscle.

30.

Eyes inward, moan arising from the throat.

Joseph O. Legaspi

¹⁰⁰ Joseph O. Legaspi, “[30](#),” in [Waxwing](#)

Instructions for Weeding a Garden

Sometimes the name of a flower
is more beautiful than the flower itself.
Amaranth, larkspur, the memory
of my mother bent over the sedum's uncombed heads
back in a garden whose smell I can no longer
pick from a swatch book.
It was August and I was learning about sleep,
the way you learn about water
when you are thirsty.

Adriana Cloud

¹⁰¹ [Adriana Cloud](#), "[Instructions for Weeding a Garden](#)," collected in [Instructions for Building a Wind Chime](#), [Poetry Society of America](#)

First Husband

I took you in your blue Walmart vest, took your may I help you
literally, took the keys to your car and threw them out the window.

I took thee to the prom. I took your best friend for a test drive,
but we were on a break. I took you stupefied

by misapplied Prozac, I took the part of Ingénue #2
to your experience, sat with weltd ass and demure face, blushing

over my bound wrists. I took your shaved curls from the sink,
and they clung to me. I took your love and called it crush.

I took you seriously and got took. I took my itinerary
across the southern states and folded the map until we overlapped.

I took the vodka bottle from your hand and poured it over my breasts.
I took your clothes that smelled like her and stuffed them

in the litter box. I took my cues from what thought I should feel
in the role of Betrayed Wife, or Betraying Wife, or Wife Who Can't

Remember Who Fucked Who Anymore. No more ingénue.
I took your hand one last time. I took down your new address.

I took your hand again. I took my tongue and
touched it to your lips, but you wouldn't kiss me.

I took that as no but knew what no meant to us,
so I took your pants off, I took no excuses,

Michael, I took your name, I took your hand,
and in the perpetual backward glance, I take your name again.

Rebecca Hazelton

¹⁰² [Rebecca Hazelton](#), "[First Husband](#)," collected in [Vow](#), [Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)

Dolphin Live Birth

"Style is knowing who you are, what you want to say, and not giving a damn."
—Gore Vidal

Ghost of Gore Vidal, please watch over me as I watch this dolphin live birth online. *We're sort of a militarized republic*, you said.
Remain over me, and what you see in the present and the future.
Art, the function of art, is to remain here. Success is made through failure, made the dolphins female, watching me, birthing me.
But need was gone?
Not sure.
What rearming? What energy and patience?
Gore Vidal, the family that previously Kickstarted for a dolphin midwife live birth disappeared from the internet without a trace.
I searched for them. They were peace-loving crust punks.
Their story is our story.
Two crust punks expecting one more wanted to *Give Birth in Hawaii with a Dolphin Midwife*.
To all the women who want a baby, over here please!
And to all the children who weren't born in a hospital, step over here please!
Reality star Scott Disick posted a photo to Instagram: a man with his dick in the mouth of a fish.
Bestiality, rape, blow jobs, pornography—this photo had it all. His caption, however, was an inquiry of taxonomy: *Does anyone know what kind of fish this is?*

The unfed mind devours itself.

The photo was taken down.
I've given some blow jobs.
Each was a difficult though rewarding gift.
I empathize for that dead or dying fish.
It is the woman without arms.

Amy Lawless

¹⁰³ Amy Lawless, "[Dolphin Live Birth](#)," in [Bennington Review](#)

Death Star

Angel of cocaine
Overdoses and middle-aged men
Discovered on floors, in bars,
In women's bathrooms—

Beneath a juvenilia of stars.

Quarantined Adderall and Michelob
Chasers.

If no one sees, does that mean
It never happened?

Getting off the medicine
Is like a religious experience,

But that doesn't make it religious,
Does it?

I hope you've collected your lies
In your exquisite
Notebook.

Cynthia Cruz

Isn't True Love Wonderful?

Ecobutch from Cornish just made me her favorite,
which is more than I can say of Kitchenslut100
or 101. Ecoslut might be the one
for me, and because of the wonders
of wondering, I can click
on pixels of my affection all
night and see their private
peccadilloes rise beneath my touch.
One likes fisting, another vanilla
ice cream licked from her hair.
Where do people come
from, where do they get
fetishes for tomboys in stilettos?
I don't know what I like until I've seen it
on a pillow 300 days in a row. It's ok
to wash the pillowcase as long as it spins
in counterintuitive ways—we all have
idiosyncrasies, if not mates. My
notmates are many, and we share
so much: birth month, love for loose-
fitting modifiers, close-ups long
on soft focus. Most employ
the selfie, which shouts how
alone they are, unless you count
vitamin supplements and hair gels
on bathroom counters. Context
matters, and in a finite you-
and-me verse, I need to hurry
and admit I love you and how
does anyone rappel out
of herself into another without grave
risks? You have a habit of tilting
your brain back, with a question.
You have a body with windows
and doors and once you left
the lights on in there, the way
people in Amsterdam in tall, slender
houses on sleepy canals will, without
draperies, a kind of invitation, a way
of saying I have nothing
to hide. I appreciate now how
you take the long way from A
to A, how you believe Z or hyacinths
or maps to crumbled places may
figure into it. I'm trying to articulate
my lack of attraction to people
trying to do things. Would you like
to love me without trying? That's

an abstract proposition that ought
to come with an airline ticket
and an overhead compartment.
I want to go away with you so we
can come home together, so we can stand
at passport control and have the man
in the glass booth glance from our papers
to the clock on the wall, back to us, and ask,
as the maitre d' once did to my first sweetheart
and me at The Lark Supper Club
outside of Iowa City in 1985: *Isn't*
true love wonderful? It is, and after
the man waves us on toward the carousel,
after we claim our suitcases and the beagle
named Rex trained to sniff out
heroin and pears and illicit French
cheeses makes a beeline
for me, unbidden, I'll unzip
myself, letting all my
light, for anyone in this
dark world to trip over.

Andrea Cohen

¹⁰⁵ [Andrea Cohen](#), "[Isn't True Love Wonderful?](#)" in [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Unfathoming](#), [Four Way Books](#)

from *The Dead Girls Speak in Unison*

Then, we lay back on limestone
in sodden undies and counted
the scorpion stars.

And when they fell
into our open guts
our torsos spread like brides.

Get into our limbic chambers!

One day you will punch
the wrong grouse in the gut
and her stingers pour

over your guilt, your quilt
your skin
your hot little grin.

Danielle Pafunda

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¹⁰⁶ Danielle Pafunda, "[Then we lay back on limestone...](#)" collected in [The Dead Girls Speak in Unison](#), [Bloof](#)

The Other Victorians

You know the Other Victorians?
The ones Foucault writes about in *The History of Sexuality*
The “frauds against procreation” who did “acts contrary to nature”
Like Michael Field, a Victorian gentleman poet
Who wrote 27 verse plays & 8 volumes of poetry
Who is not a man at all
But two women, an Englishwoman and her niece
And their chow dog they adored
They wrote poems about flowers pussy and the patriarchy
What else are you doing to do
When you are the Other Victorians
In whose hearts burn a fervent heat
And Virginia Woolf is only a Victorian baby in a bonnet
So cannot yet measure your entangled violence?
Katharine Bradley (1846-1914)
Lost her dad at two and when her mom died
She went to college in Cambridge & Paris
Then joined Ruskin’s Guild of Saint George
A small utopian society for art snobs
Kat pissed off Ruskin when she wrote to tell him
She lost God but found a Skye Terrier
Annoying Ruskin was necessary defiance, I’m sure
Look at what he did to pretty Effie Grey
Married her and then ignored and bullied her
Because a woman’s body wasn’t what he expected
Effie got a divorce due to his “incurable impotency”
And made off with a Pre-Raphaelite painter
What else can you do, Kat? When they call you
“An aberration of the genetic instinct”
And make you “an object of analysis and target of intervention”
You adopt your niece Edith Cooper (1862-1913)
When her mother dies, adopt a joint pseudonym
Properly anonymous and vaguely pastoral
To write poems like “Maids not to you my mind doth change”
In which between women exists “manifold desire”
Sounding a lot like French Feminist theory of the 70s
Together you write, “Men I defy, allure, estrange,
Prostrate, make bond or free”
Back to your medieval craft guild, John

What can you do?
When sex and its effects are to be “pursued
Down to their slenderest ramifications”
By doctors, clergy, police
You are financially independent that helps
Working side by side you wrote verse plays
Loyalty or Love, The Tragic Mary, or Attila, My Attila
And poems about sex behind parquet doors

Beneath bedclothes, under surveillance
Hiding from those other Victorians
Weeping over Tennyson in ferny parlors
You describe a girl with her “lips apart,
like aspen-leaflets trembling in the breeze”
Trembling! Leaflets! So lovely! So Victorian!
Now your “souls so knit, / I leave a page half-writ”
For a quickie in the hedges of St. James’ park

Robert Browning praised Michael Field’s work
Edith wrote to him about Katherine
“She is my senior, by but fifteen years
She has lived with me, taught me, encouraged me
And joined me to her poetic life”
An industrious writing team taking the scene by storm
With books of poems *like Wild Honey from Various Thyme*
Mystic Trees, and *Poems of Adoration*
Mixing with the heavies of the nineties
The Aestheticists, Pater, Wilde, young Yeats
Friends called you The Michaels, The Field, The Michael Fields
Yet you fought with Aubrey Beardsley
Over his “depraved” art, which is disappointing
Because I want interesting Victorian artists to get along
The Field begged Browning not to reveal their secret
Edith wrote that “would indeed be utter ruin to us”
“We have many things to say that the world
Will not tolerate from a woman’s lips”
They must maintain the disguise
A job of many Other Victorians
Unless you wanted to go the way of Wilde
Sentenced to two years’ hard labor
For “gross indecency” for the “Love that dare not speak its name”
He had to walk a treadmill pick oakum wear a hood
The wit of Europe called CC3, the number of his cell
Hunger, illness, and injury destroying his health
Upon release, he sailed for France never to return home
And never saw his sons again
His horrid young boyfriend betrayed him
And he died sick and broken, exiled to a filthy hotel
The Michael Fields mourned Wilde
So glam and sparkling, a raging diamond
A thousand vicious Victorian judges burn
In hell for harming him!

In the poem “Unbosoming” your breast “is rent
With the burthen and strain of its great content”
And the love breeding in your heart
Is like a “thousand vermilion-beads
That push, and riot, and squeeze, and clip”
And flowers have a “tremulous, bowery fold”
As if from Luce Irigaray’s *This Sex Which is Not One*

My best friend, a real live lesbian
Thinks this poem is a little silly, which it probably is
She says I wish I were a lesbian, probably true
In that stupid way straight girls think it's easier
To date women rather than men
As if the patriarchy doesn't wreck us all
But she finds Michael Field moving
Knowing what it's like to live hidden even from yourself
To walk into the grocery store at thirteen
And hear someone say, What is that?
To have your father say your dead mother
Would not have liked you to be gay
To not come out until after college
And finally to decide to live revealed

Michael Field, you dedicated your first book *Long Ago*
To Sappho, a girl's best ancient friend
In the preface you said, "Devoutly as the fiery-bosomed Greek
Turned in her anguish to Aphrodite
To accomplish her heart's desires
I have turned to the one woman
Who has dared to speak unfalteringly
Of the fearful mastery of love"
Another problem for Other Victorians
For all of us really, the fearful mastery of love
But especially hard for them
Locked up in asylums, sent to penal colonies & houses of correction
Punished for "moral folly" and "physical imbalance"
Or sentenced to bed like Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Or Woolf and most everybody dies tragically
The poor Brontës all died so terribly
What a second novel Emily would have written! So amazing!
Could her sister really have burned it? So unfair!
Emily had a dog named Keeper
(And so did my real life lesbian best friend)
And a falcon named Hero, now I'm distracted
By my desire to make the past
Palatable and comprehensible
Surely one of Power/Knowledge's microtechniques

What on earth are you supposed to do?
You're not the Lady of Shalott
Not trapped in a tower surrounded by a moat
Stuck inside to work on your weird weavings
Not under a vague curse that makes you
Kill yourself like a Victorian performance artist
The second you see Lancelot galloping outside
You bedeck your boat with flowers to float
Down to Camelot and perish on the spot
Only for Lancelot to say, "She has a pretty face"
But you too are "half sick of shadows"

You're not Christina Rossetti either
Who rejects her suitors with a "No thank you, John"
And rejects chess, too, why not? So boring
And attends to fallen women at a prison
And writes lesbian incest poems about goblins
In which sisters lick each other's faces
A Victorian badass that Christina
And Woolf is just a girl when you are writing
Her mother is dying and abandoning her
To her stepbrothers with their roving hands
And it's before Freud says we're all bisexual
Some more than others clearly
Long before Gertrude and Alice walk Basket around Paris
Who's better? Their dog or yours? Yours
You're Michael Field, dammit
You parade him through London's parks
Write a book of poems for him, *Whym Chow: Flame of Love*
In class one of my student asks why all lesbians love dogs
I'm taken aback, but he explains his two moms
Have always had dogs & all their friends too
But all my lesbian friends adore cats, I protest
My best friend thinks this is funny
She has two cats, thank you, John

What are you going to do?
Publish your poems that claim
"If thou are beloved, oh then
Fear no grief from mortal man"
But it isn't true, Edith's dad disapproves
Of your love so she suffers from what Foucault
Says, "There is not one but many silences"
And when he dies, you buy a grand old house
With the money and when your dog dies
You both convert to Roman Catholicism
Get caught up in the majesty of it all
The rituals, candles, velvets, the dark places
And Katherine you don't say anything
When Edith gets cancer and you do, too
You hold her tremulous hand and wipe her brow
Stay up reading to her when she can't sleep for the pain
To ease her tempestuous heart
Perhaps reading *H.D. Imagiste* who just published
Her first poems also inspired by Sappho
And who would live in London with her wife during the Blitz
And Kat, you die just eight months after Edith dies
As the Suffragettes bomb churches
The Great War comes marching
And everybody will die those Other Victorians
Not just the frail crazy pretty ladies floating
Down the river with flowers trailing from their fingers
But two women bedside gazing at each other

Surrounded by the fruits of their labor
What are you going to do?
Write poems and resist silence and death

Camille Guthrie

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¹⁰⁷ Camille Guthrie, "[The Other Victorians](#)," in [At Length](#)

& Later,

one of the star-eyed neighbors
spills white all over

the carpet again & leans into

it like sniffing
a fish's ear.

The other neighbor
is Pisces reclining,

So & So on the couch
in Atari's glow.

All of these habits

from Vietnam, blamed
on Agent Orange—

heroin & gunplay
first, cocaine after.

Not every fatherless black could
object to war like Sun Ra did.

Not every fatherless black could
get kicked out of the army
before the fighting

started like Richard Pryor.

Hardly any fatherless blacks
could skip Vietnam,

as far out from this space
as any black boy will get.

Listen: the neighbor's cigarette
is about to burn into
her own hair violently,
the same way it burned

a socket into that unfortunate
shag rug in their living room.

Listen: we have to get
off this pockmarked planet.

Adrian Matejka

¹⁰⁸ [Adrian Matejka](#), “[& Later](#),” in [Poem-a-Day](#), collected in [Map to the Stars](#), [Penguin](#)

Mortification Montage

She writes her mother from camp: "I don't have enough scrunchies! Everybody here has like thirty scrunchies!"
Her mother sends a box of scrunchies made from quilting scraps & old bra straps.
She wants to die. She draws a *Guess?* label onto the butt of some jeans from Sears.
The fifth-grade student body disapproves.
She gets back on the horse; she asks a boy to dance.
The boy says, "With a dog?" His lacrosse buddies erupt in a chorus of barking & belching.
She buys a T-shirt so she has something to cry into.
She steals a pair of shoes so she can get away faster.
When her stepfather picks up the phone, she says, "I'm going to jail." She sings Mozart's "Lacrimosa" in the back of the cruiser. She holds a Mr. Coffee carafe against her inner thigh. The Cure's *Pornography* plays on & on. Her prom date comes drunk in a Mickey Mouse tux.
They dine & dash. He goes down on her with a Maglite flashlight. "This is the labia majora" he says with a poke. "This is the labia minora," he says with a poke.
She flunks out of community college because slam poetry is more important. She drops out of slam poetry because, "Swing dancing!"
She brings a man home. "Wait here," she breathes.
She puts on a crinoline, a 1950s prom dress, coral lipstick & a dead woman's stockings.
She runs back into the man's arms:
"Oh, Dennis! Don't take me behind the bleachers! I'm a virgin! I have to be home by eleven!"
The man blinks at her. She doubles down, rips her bodice, slaps herself, says:
"How dare you, Dennis! I'm the prom queen!"
The man leaves. She tries to sleep her way through the zodiac. She offers a defense in her journal: "For all *intensive* purposes," she writes, "I'm doing it for my art."
She takes a swig from a beer with three butts in it.
She orders the shrimp scampi and feels real sophisticated.
A man says, "What do you really want?"
She says, "To be the most important poet of my generation." The man looks away.
"I feel sorry for you," he says.
"I think you're going to lead a very lonely life."
In the bay, a man-of-war brushes against her arm like the tall, preoccupied stranger at a party

where her wine is about to leave three long welts
on the arm of the hosts' white leather couch.

Karyna McGlynn

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¹⁰⁹ [Karyna McGlynn](#), "[Mortification Montage](#)," collected in [Hothouse](#), [Sarabande](#)

The Origins of the Practice

In some orders the eyes are trained to look neither left nor right as one walks, but to focus instead on two or three steps ahead. Cloister manuals might ask one to avoid looking up as a person

enters the room so as to keep the still-point focus of attention. One could, I suppose, keep any of the senses in custody, but eyes are naturally unruly, straying without conscience.

Recall the infant's peek-a-boo, the thrill of presence and absence, or the would-be lover's stolen glance, or the aggression in sizing someone up, the contempt one senses in an unrelenting stare.

And then there is Agnes, about whom little is certain except the importance of eyes in her story. Twelve-year-old daughter of Roman aristocrats, who may themselves have been converts,

she becomes a Christian during the reign of Diocletian and his persecutions. A prefect's son, who is smitten by her, and possibly her wealth, proposes marriage, but she refuses,

saying she has already *consecrated her virginity to a spouse, who cannot be beheld by mortal eyes*. Her conversion is brought to the attention of a judge who invites her to return

to the pagan and burn incense at the shrine of Minerva. When she refuses, he threatens her with torture. Fires are lit, hooks and spikes assembled, but these do not frighten her.

The judge orders her stripped before a crowd in the square, thinking humiliation will work. But a miracle of visual custody occurs—the crowd, especially the young men, avert their eyes,

all but one lad, curious and impudent, with lust taking hold. Instantly he is struck by lightning and blinded. The blow leaves him convulsing in the square. The lesson, however,

does not end with him. The judge will have to order Agnes executed. Here the accounts vary widely: she is burned alive, or beheaded, or given *the gentle death*—a slit artery in the neck.

Perhaps it takes time for the authorities to decide on a method. As their betters discuss what to do, the ordinary soldiers pause to look things over. They speak of the child's long hair

that during the day had lengthened into a veil to cover her body. They marvel at the shackles that keep falling from her tiny wrists. They puzzle over the fires that won't stay lit. And like soldiers

everywhere, they stand and stare at what they would have to do,
but did not want to do, and would do anyway. This reverie lasts
long enough to make the child herself grow impatient with them.

Agnes calls out toward one who has his sword already drawn:
This lover, she shouts, this one at last, I confess it, pleases me.
I shall welcome the whole length of his blade into my bosom.

What are you waiting for, executioner? What are you waiting for?

Fred Marchant

¹¹⁰ [Fred Marchant](#), "[The Origins of the Practice](#)," collected in [The Looking House](#), [Graywolf Press](#)

National Poetry Month

The parade was dull. The queen old, wearing a frumpy sweater against the cold. No candy. The marching band wore black, smoked cigarettes, and whined a lot. Some guy in a beard guided a giant balloon shaped like a question mark. When the hyacinth girl ran off with the mermaid, a language poet read his work in his native tongue, something he called “language.” People learned something, though—you can’t teach old rain new tricks. And don’t look a gift book in the mouth. In fact, don’t look at it at all. Of course, most people don’t need to be told that. The month was long and cruel—as it should be. When the parade ended, someone woke briefly and was awarded tenure. People went home to watch television. The home team won in extra innings.

Kevin Griffin

¹¹¹ Kevin Griffith, “[National Poetry Month](#),” in [Pearl](#), collected in [Denmark, Kangaroo, Orange, Pearl Editions](#)

Bat Boy Washed Up Onshore

I have grieved Bat Boy. When I was a sophomore with a joint and a bad boyfriend, he was an urchin with spray paint and an underpass that felt like home. When my trip turned oh-shit-I-can-only-see-in-black-and-white, Bat Boy took me to the gas station to walk the neon pharmacy of the candy aisle. Anyone would have cried to stare at the newsprint of his face, but he was the leather-winged angel of that place, showing me how every microscopic quadrant of my tongue was a different piece of molten fructose architecture. People who are depressed can't see colors as brightly. The blur of his fang-teeth was probably hepatitis yellow if I could have seen him clearly, but after that I got clean because it seems you never get to go back to the first glittering rainbowed miracle of a gas station and wishing for it newsprints your face and your insides. Bat Boy was gone a long time, undercover for the CIA in the mountains of Tora Bora, an American hero in the headlines, even if you couldn't see through the gray of his red-white-and-blue bandanna. I was busy organizing protests with a lot of colorful posters and tie-dye. He's not the only person I don't know at all anymore.

When the paper went bankrupt everyone became very frank about how it was all made up. There wasn't even a kook in an attic reporters went out to interview. Just cynics with word processors. I thought I remembered one day buying a pack of Tic Tacs, white and plain in their plastic box, when I saw the cover where he washed up dead on the beach and it was like when Shelley was found on the shore and how they said his heart just wouldn't burn, waterlogged and smoking on the pure, beating some untranslated poem. But actually that's not true, so I looked it up again, and it was the merman I was thinking of. Bat Boy is without end. He's looking up at the incoming drone, he's under the overpass flashing his teeth, he's hissing in the static behind the news that a certain number of people are dead and a certain number are wounded and I wonder what we might say, were we ever to pass each other at the periphery of someone else's war or natural disaster, how we would talk if one of us were really there.

Kathryn Nuernberger

¹¹² Kathryn Nuernberger, "[Bat Boy Washed Up Onshore](#)," in [The Southeast Review](#), collected in [The End of Pink](#), [BOA](#)

A Glossary of French Orgasms

Averse, nf

A sudden shower of orgasms. Also, a deluge of pleasure.

Bougonnement, nm

A grumpy orgasm. An orgasm that is always complaining. *Is that the best you can do?*

Croissé, nf

An orgasm that takes you to the place where life and death part, where heaven and earth meet.

Diabliesse, nf

An orgasm that burns, or at least singes your skin.

Étoile, nf

An orgasm that thinks it is the only star in your heaven.

Fraude, nf

A fake or deceptive orgasm. Also, a smuggler of orgasms.

Gifle, nm

An orgasm that slaps you in the face. Also, a wakeup call.

Hargne, nf

An ill-tempered orgasm that makes you pay for your sins, or at least confess them.

Idem, nf

An orgasm that is always the same. A regular, everyday orgasm.

Jouet, nm

An orgasm that treats you like a toy or something to play with when she's bored. Also, the orgasm next door.

Kamikaze, nm

An orgasm that can only happen once in a lifetime. Also, a lethal orgasm.

Local, nm

An orgasm from your hometown. Also, an orgasm with pompoms.

Moulant, nm

An orgasm that fits you as snugly as a wool dress, hot out of the dryer.

Narratrice, nf

An orgasm that narrates events as they happen.

Ombre, nf

A shadowy orgasm who takes your light away forever.

Prisme, nf

A transcendental orgasm. An orgasm that changes the way you see the world.

Quotepart, nf

The number of orgasms you are allowed to have in a single life.

Rappel, nm

An orgasm that cries out again and again. Also, an orgasm that reminds you of its speed.

Spectateur, -trice, n

An orgasm that watches you, as if from above, whenever it makes love to you. Also, an out-of-body orgasm.

Tragique, nm

An orgasm that ends badly. An orgasm that regrets having met you.

Utopie, nf

The afterlife of the orgasm. And the afterlife of the afterlife of the orgasm.

Vague, nf

An orgasm wave. Also, an orgasm that washes over you not once, but at least three times before leaving.

Watt, nm

A unit of power, used to measure the current flowing through the heart of the orgasm.

Xénophobe, nf

An orgasm that dislikes anything new. A conservative orgasm.

Yoyo, nm

An orgasm that changes its mind frequently. Also, an orgasm on a string.

Zeste, nm

The peel of an orgasm. The flavor or spirit of the thing. Also, a tiny orgasm with a large bang.

Nin Andrews

¹¹³ [Nin Andrews](#), "[A Glossary of French Orgasms](#)," collected in [Our Lady of the Orgasm](#), [MadHat](#)

Blanche Remembers

In 1933 in Chicago,
they would see
gangsters in classic limousines,
the ones with rounded fenders.

Dillinger and his gang
were shooting up the town.
Her brothers played
cops and robbers,
or stickball;
ran wild in the streets.

In the tiny apartment,
she had no bed,
slept on a trunk.

She and her brothers
got scarlet fever.
Their mother was sick too,
so the kids had to go
to different hospitals.

She wrote to her brother,
“My hospital has cute mice.
What is yours like?”

He wrote her back,
“Please don’t send
any more letters.
You are a bad girl
telling lies about mice.”

He never believed her.
Even now,
at eighty-six
he thinks she was lying.

Lori Desrosiers

¹¹⁴ [Lori Desrosiers](#), “[Blanche Remembers](#),” collected in [The Philosopher's Daughter](#), [Salmon Poetry](#)

the deer become pre-teens

suddenly, the woods are full
of magazine cutouts, glittered
with watermelon body spray,
echoing with shrieks
& key-clacks & the telltale noise
of someone signing on to AIM.
the deer's hooves are painted
ungodly colors and some of them
have stacks of bracelets
around their ankles
and are daring each other
to rip them off.
their tattoos are temporary,
thank god, but a few
of them have figured out
how to get the older deer
to buy them wine coolers,
the hems of their skins
and shirts inching higher
by the hour. the deer
can take care of themselves,
though, they're smart girls.
you wouldn't understand
the things they're planning
on three-way calls.
you wouldn't understand
the things they do
in the dark.

Cassandra de Alba

¹¹⁵ [Cassandra de Alba](#), "[the deer become pre-teens](#)," in [Drunk In A Midnight Choir](#), collected in [habitats](#), [Horse Less](#)

When I am a Teenage Boy

I am like my parents' house, in a state
of constant remodel we can ill afford,
the noise behind a tarp producing little more

than dust. But the footprint must change
despite great expense. Large parts
need to move for the sake of *flow*. I learn

the trick is to appear intact, though recently
the problem of my torso is introduced.
My mother says I've always been a little

Jew around the waist. She had specific
hopes, shelled out for the stag tuxedo suit,
sent me for cotillion lessons. Mind like

a boardwalk jewelry store, heyday 1962,
she wears her hostess gown in the kitchen
while I creak along with the crock pot

pulverizing our Sunday stew. Because
I'm an only, she put a TV in my room
for company. It's a solid business, taping cable

porn to VHS. But when I'm caught extorting
the gym coach, meds are discussed at school.
My mother says we don't do meds,

my dad and me. And I'm not caught often.
Who would I be without this brain that itches
like the dragonflies I hose from the pool's filter?

Instead, I take myself in hand. I buy a trench
with birthday money sent by a childless aunt
we thought dead years ago. We don't use

the word "lesbian" because my mother says,
Who says that sort of thing? I perform my coat
darkly in a graveyard split by an interstate where

our housekeeper's son is housed. Here, I feel most
vivid, futurely, Peter Parker praying for his spider.
Oh, I am replete with plans. I'll be like that prince

in the novel I didn't read in English class.
I don't finish books, but I get the gist—
some sad lady who offs herself by train. Ballrooms.

Unpronounceable Russians suffering. Blah blah.
But that guy Stiva eating his sausages? Someday
I'll have a faithful servant, too. Or at least a wife.

I fear I'll always be a little piggy in the middle,
but that grease I'll lick from my fingers,
it tastes like everything now.

Erin Belieu

¹¹⁶ Erin Belieu, "[When I am a Teenage Boy](#)," in [Willow Springs](#)

Untitled (Future)

I touch your sharp hip bone like a weak clairvoyant.
It is possible to love without being lovers.
The world will lose another species of toad
before we fix our morning coffee.
The moon frowns down to earthly lovers,
as pragmatic as a mechanical engineer.
Here it is, the future already.
We make love or we do not or it is love that makes us.
Even the Dead Sea is dying.
Bits of space rubbish collide like young drunks fucking.
The future is a no-holds-barred event.
But we make love like concerned cardiologists.
Or we do not.
There is the moon, speckled with glass colonies.
Even the dead can see: you will either stay or leave
And well-fashioned machines will roll out green
highways and high-speed rails.
And tomorrow's commuters will commute.

Paul-Victor Winters

¹¹⁷ Paul-Victor Winters, "[Untitled \(Future\)](#)," in [KYSO Flash](#)

Security Camera

Sweethearts in school uniforms spoon froyo
into each other's mouths on a bench across
from the Korean consulate.
Death to the infidels.

Down the street some boys shed their aprons
to practise skateboard flops off an abandoned Buick.
We shall bathe the streets in blood.
Someone's mother drives by,

sipping bourbon from a spill-proof mug. The nose-ringed
cashier says, "Moulin Rouge has layers
that you miss unless you're on X."
Revenge revenge revenge revenge.

A kid in an all-terrain stroller prefers his thumb
to the pacifier strapped to his collar.
Die, you fascist pig.
Gravel gathers in the curb

with stubs, shards, and other garbage.
The bones of the filthy will burn forever.
Little fists of grass muscle through the sidewalk cracks.
The bus slows for an expectant mother,

but she's just catching her breath.
The godless will be torn to pieces by dogs,
and crows will gorge on their eyes.
A businesswoman in cowboy boots

fields a call between drags. There's blood in the water
and she's not going to miss her chance.

Adam Sol

¹¹⁸ Adam Sol, "Security Camera," collected in [Complicity](#), McClelland & Stewart

from *Please Bury Me in This*

I am writing to you as an act of immolation, relief.

If each letter is a will, I want Djuna Barnes' words written in the dust:

The unendurable is the beginning of the curve of joy.

Once I stood in a black dress at a bus stop and opened a clear umbrella.

Waiting for hours in a glass room.

Dear world, I want now what I have always wanted: scissors and someone to write to.

Matches and someone to write to.

I mean the bowl I'm carrying is broken and filled with feathers.

Whatever God is, something gentle inside something ruined in the mind.

~

Daydreaming and soon, between my fingers, a filter and a long ash.

Like a name repeated too many times, whispered mouth to ear.

How I collected shells on the beach but at home they were no longer beautiful.

I want to make it last just a few minutes, like the first words I saw written in the sky: *Laura, will you . . .*

Look up, my father said at the end of the Santa Monica pier.

Laura, I am writing to disappear.

~

Reaching in to touch its spine, for a few years I carried Duras' *The Lover* in my purse.

I touch my mouth with one finger to hold still.

When I first met my mother, I lay on top of her in my underwear and shook until I choked.

To reduce anxiety, mainly, the length of the binding, the locating tic.

As if *The Lover* was singular, not something entered only through separation.

To open her book is to begin to tear her apart.

~

Like the coldness of the body, to paraphrase, the head split, the top *physically* removed.

I want to be hurt like this.

A poem like any religion, mortality and bewilderment confined and lit.

The singing I heard as a child as I sat in the stall of the temple bathroom with my legs shaking.

To mean *glorious*, if I read Dickinson in a doorway someday, I will make the shape of a gun with my hand near my head and pull the trigger.

Allison Benis White

¹¹⁹ [Allison Benis White](#), "[I am writing to you as an act of immolation...](#)" collected in [Please Bury Me in This](#), [Four Way](#)

You Are Everything to Me But You Are Nowhere On Earth Because You Have Died

a woman is being choked with Christmas lights
by nothing except herself and there is no one
in the house except for her and the skeleton of her body

there is a man on a chair late at night when she
has gone to sleep and he paints her face neon
with glue and her mouth is plastered shut

like her cunt that has been blinded by acid rain
and she is so sad now, so sad that she Instagrams
photos of herself without clothes because there is

nothing left to hide anymore except killing
herself but she's saving that for a day where
the rain sounds like Nico and does she really
have a hand in her forgetting? Beneath

everyone's face is a skull and there is nothing
sweeter than waking up and begging your
way back in for the want of two and not one.

Joanna C. Valente

¹²⁰ Joanna C. Valente, "[You are everything to me but you are nowhere on earth because you have died](#)," in *Typo*

A Story from My Romantic Past. It Was Full Of Misgivings

Meaning it would always start in a small room that was filled with new carpeting.
And black boxes painted brown.
Like a showroom for people who don't like things.
There were women there, too. Innumerable women.
And they were wearing a type of small animal that coiled around their fingers
and elbows and panty lines. The animals made small figures over their décolletage.
I tied the animals to the radiator pipes. I fed them pretzels cut into small pieces.
I was trying to make them less bashful.
How is it a normal person can sound out whatever they think are being put in parentheses?
I was an OK intellectual. I liked dancing to techno. I had taken a vacation once to Nice, France.
I would say I was at least tolerable.
Which was a key to my success in romantic undertakings.
That, and living by myself.
I made dinner by myself. I learned to drink wine by myself after work on Fridays. I spent longish nights
with my hand held above a ventilation duct until a small animal would crawl out.
I was hoping for it to be mangled,
or at least lame from climbing through ductwork and half-operational vent fans.
The things we all do for a little attention.
"I have a collection of small animals!" I announced one night at a friend's party.
This might not have been the best headline for my match.com profile.
But I had pillows that were small animals. And recyclable bags that looked vaguely like animals.
There were open-wound animals I kept living by putting breath mints into their sores.
Which certainly gave a fresh scent to my apartment.
The scent was called Small Animal with Pedigree.
The real story of my romantic past begins when I learned to go out dressed as a small animal.
I had sewn tiny teeth into my wrist.
I carried a pair of pliers. I carried blueprints of small rooms and the various ductwork feeding into them.

Kent Shaw

¹²¹ Kent Shaw, "[A Story from My Romantic Past. It Was Full Of Misgivings](#)," *HOBART*

Mushrooms

A sudden spotlight floods the black empty stage. How long have we been sitting here? Are you, next to me, still there? Still you? Funny how the dark can make you feel alone—even though people are all around you—and feel bad, like you did something dumb. A person (?) in a panda costume steps from the wings, strolls center stage and pulls a cherry from its pocket. “This is a paycheck,” it declares, the voice within the head muffled by thick fake fur. “Bullshit,” you whisper in my ear—whisper because, I can tell, you’re afraid the panda will hear you. Maybe I should be afraid, too. All I feel is alone—even though people are around me—and bad because the panda thinks I’m dumb enough to believe its lies. But we’re not making a move to kill it—you and I—as pandas are highly endangered so maybe we are that dumb. Maybe it’s right. Maybe we should try making babies with it. I read somewhere that, next to diamonds, pandas are the hardest things to make on earth.

Jennifer L. Knox

from *The Last Great Adventure Is You*

Somewhere they tell a woman to accept tragedy with grace
Somewhere a horse falls into a burning trench
The body of the horse does not understand
The body of the woman will not bend
The night falls into her ungentle
Off her bones the night is falling him
She rides the ghosts of all horses fallen
She ghosts the fallen horse all night
The first painting on the walls of a cave was a horse
Over a horse the first war
He was seized from the sky
Taken from the moon's dark side
Weighed down with bones and revenge
The body of the horse does not understand
Somewhere a fallen horse drinks the blood of a woman
With blood under their eyes they incant their fallen
She will die the next of kin all the horses in the sky
She will die again and again
All the men in the earth rise up from the dead
From their graves they unearth the trenches
But from grave to grace horse and woman will not consent
They scatter the bones on the moon's dark side
Somewhere the horses in the sky rein down
Somewhere in the cave of her horse falling
Bury this last woman alive

Rosebud Ben-Oni

¹²³ Rosebud Ben-Oni, "[Somewhere they tell a woman...](#)" in *Waxwing*

Snowstorm in Detroit

A stuck car bleeds
transmission fluid, spots the new snow.

Across the street, a car pulls
to the curb. The woman who was stabbed
last week struggles out, eases
up her steps.

The morning paperboy, hours late
runs down the street
tripping on his unbuckled boots
dropping his papers.
He gets up, walks away
the wet papers blowing in the snow.

An old pickup skids
into a parked car, keeps on going.
A man in a t-shirt running,
yelling, throws snowballs.

The guy who once set a cat on fire
pushes himself down the street
leans into the storm.

Next door, a child cries, a woman cries,
a dog barks and scratches the door.

The stuck car dies.
The preacher gets out, slams the door
stands in the street
hugging an armload of prayers.

Jim Daniels

¹²⁴ Jim Daniels, "[Snowstorm in Detroit](#)," collected in [Places/Everyone](#), [The University of Wisconsin](#)

from *Diving Makes the Water Deep*

30.

This colleague was very lonely. When she went through a breakup, I gave her Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*. She read it and said how could a book purportedly about color not discuss issues in Asian-American diaspora (this colleague's field)? I saw the point, and have since raised a related one when teaching the book; and moon has the nerve to not be the sun. (What to make of criticism that says the problem with one thing is that it is not everything, or even a potential set of possible other things? The problem with one life.)

Zach Savich

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¹²⁵ [Zach Savich](#), "[The colleague was very lonely...](#)" collected in [Diving Makes the Water Deep](#), [Rescue Press](#)

Kansas City Loves You

but you're tired of her
so you pick a fight with a bottle
of Mad Dog 20/20 on a bet
that you'd puke neon. You do.
A hipster takes a picture
of it so you leave that party
in a city that knows you're
unarmed. It loves the smell
of your need for anything
liquid or pulsing, leads you
to an alley bar where you find
a girl who leans close to
complain about her infected nipple
ring. Kiss her to make her stop.
Her girlfriend is watching, promising
to cut you if you touch her
again. You dare her. Aim
her imaginary shank to the wrong side
of your chest. Turns out she's all talk. So
are you. The moment resolves
into a Queen song on the jukebox.
Try to fit the movement
of your hips into a song that
doesn't want you. Settle for a boy.
Tell him to call you anything he wants.
He whispers Grace in your ear
like he's saying a prayer
for a better woman. When you fall
off your barstool he'll promise
to kiss your bruise later which is all
anyone really wants so you follow him
to his apartment. He shows you pictures
of women bound in ribbon. You ask him
to show you his bathroom, the walls
a muddy midnight you want to lick.
Your body settles for tiled floor
to cool your bum wine fever, holds you
better than he could. You swear you can
hear his disappointed hard-on thumping
against the other side of the bathroom door,
and you try dreaming an exit.

Krysten Hill

Prayer

I've been in more laps than a napkin.

Isis, Osiris: Mae's venerable kin:
raise her up, anoint nipples, lips
in pink oils, rhinestones. Name her:
Never Mother, Moral Vermin, Minor
Porn, Vireo, Viper.
Embalm her remains in one-liners.
Preen ever in her, ever over her. Let her rise
on TV to violins: alive ever
as a hanker, a slip of spin, prism of skin
to enliven lovers, liars, to revile time.
Here's a little lay for that Never-
Has-Been, Ever-Has-Been, Nation's Stain: here's
a thin ankh beaten in tin. O Mae, O Mother, O Rival—
Ain't no sin.

Paisley Rekdal

Do You?

You asked once if I thought you shouldn't be married. Perhaps (I think I said) you married the wrong person. To each their poison, their chain, their joy. Their hospital their someone at home. Dependent, partner, passenger, hostage. To each their ring and albatross. To each their cross, their pause. To each their myth and law their allergy their and pleasure. Each to their frame, each to their mold. To each their fuel and code. To marrying up, marrying in, marrying late. For the children. For the hell of it.

Sophie Klahr

¹²⁸ [Sophie Klahr](#), "[Do You](#)," in [The Rumpus](#), collected in [Meet Me Here at Dawn](#), [Yes Yes](#)

And Death Demands a Labor

When it rains in Boston, from each street rises
the smell of sea. So do the faces of the dead.
For my father, I will someday write:
On this day endeth this man, who did all he could
to craft the most intricate fears, this man
whose waking dreams were of breaking the small bones
in the feet of all the world's birds. Father.
You know the stories. You were raised on them.
To end a world, a god dances. To kill a demon,
a goddess turns into one. Almanacs of annihilation
are chronicled in cosmic time. Go on.
Batter everything of mine that you can find.
Find my roe deer with the single antler. Kill him.
Find a girl, or a woman. Display to me her remains
on some unpaved expanse, like road kill
on Kentucky highways, turning from flesh to a
fine sand made of ground bone, under a sun
whose surface reaches temperatures six times hotter
than the finest crematory. On the surface of the earth,
our remains are in unholy concert with the remains
of all who have gone before and all who will follow,
and with all who live. In this way, our ground
resembles a bone house. Search in my body
for my heart, find it doesn't sit gently
where you learned it to be. Thief in my armory.
Take my saws, take my torches, and drown
my phalanx of bees. Carve into me the words
of the chronicler of hell. Make your very best
catastrophe. My piano plays loud and fast
although my hands are nowhere to be found.
Father, as you well know, I am but a woman.
I believe in neither gods nor goddesses.
I have left my voice up and down the seam
of this country. I, unlike you, need no saws,
or torches. The bees you drowned will come to me
again. Each time you bear your weapons, I,
no more than a woman, grow a new limb.
Each time you use a weapon, my sinews grow
like vines that devour a maple tree.
When I cry, my face becomes the inescapable sea,
and when you drain blood from a creature,
I drink it. On this day this man died,
having always eaten the good food
amid the angry ghosts, having always made
the most overwrought hells.
On this day the moon waxes gibbous
and the moths breed in the old carpets.
On this day from a slit in the ground rises

a girl who does not live long.
On this day to me a lover turns his back
and will not meet my eye.
On this day the faces of the death-marked
are part-willow, part-lion.
On this day has died an artist of ugly tapestries,
and his wares burst into flame.
On this day endeth this man upon who
I hurl the harvest of this ghostly piano,
and on the surface of this exceptional world
the birds have all come to our thresholds,
our windows and our doors, our floorboards,
our attic crannies and underground storerooms,
wires and railroads, tarmacs, highways,
cliffs and oceans, and have all begun to laugh,
a sound like an orange and glittering fire
that originates from places unseen.

Sumita Chakraborty

Places Everyone

"There's a place for everyone in our organization."

The best-looking women
work in bedding.
The fat, wholesome women who smell like cookies
work in kitchen.
In china and silver
the women are fragile, elegant, middle-aged.
In men's
hen-pecked grandfathers
with their pasty smiles
suck ass to sell suits.
The healthy bastards
with sons who have failed them
work in sporting goods.
All the angry people
work downstairs in the stockroom
heaving boxes in and out of trucks.
That's where all the blacks work.
I work down there
tossing boxes with them
not even trying
to match their anger.

Jim Daniels

¹³⁰ Jim Daniels, "[Places Everyone](#)," collected in [Places/Everyone](#), [The University of Wisconsin](#)

Jellyfish

The dark sea dreams them.
They are the inexchangeable
currency of dreams,

the interest the other world
pays and pays into this one.
In the blueing pre-dawn

they seem hewn out
from the littoral like great,
waterlogged diamonds,

an interior gleam.
Who speaks for them
speaks for the secret

side of the womb
for they are the long-tasseled
death-bonnets of children

we conceive but never
bring to term. And so we love
and jointly curse them.

It is impossible
to tell if they reach for us
or we for them,

so strange is their delicate
gravity: They are sisters
to the moon then, and pulse

in her wake, a curdled
blooming of echoes
as she too is an echo.

But in the fluorescent pink
and green pockets
of their bodies, softer

than night, they're smuggling
rumors of those suns we fail
to imagine. They hold whole

oceans beneath their umbrellas.
Tell me, friend, is there an end
to revelation? The poison

flowers blossom inside me
like colored Rorschachs
I might come to believe in.

Evening and thunderheads
in the austral sky, the jellyfish
tides, an exhibition

of lightnings. Scaled-down
Hiroshimas of the deep,
they flare in the mind,

their cold medusa-bells
resounding, calling us back
to the black sands of sleep.

George David Clark

¹³¹ [George David Clark](#), "[Jellyfish](#)," in [Southern Poetry Review](#), collected in [Reveille](#), [University of Arkansas Press](#)

Rain

Always, before rain, the windows grew thick with fog.
Mist descended over the evening rooftops
and rain made generalities of the neighborhood.
Rain made red leaves stick to car windows.
Rain made the houses vague. A car
slid through rain past rows of houses.
The moon swiveled on a wet gear above it.
The moon—a searchlight suspended from one of the airships—
lit the vague face peering through the windshield,
the car sliding down the rain-filled darkness
toward the highway. The men controlling the airships
were searching for him,
and he passed through the rain
as a thought passes through the collective mind
of the state. Here I am in this rain-filled poem,
looking out my kitchen window into the street,
having read the news of the day—
we are hunting them in our neighborhoods,
they have no place among us—
and now the car has turned the corner and disappeared
into the searchlights that make from the rain
glittering cylinders of power.

Kevin Prufer

Pink Moon Self Portrait

Once I told a poet at a bar that I was having difficulty. “Oh, Joanna,” she said. “Don’t have difficulty.” I laughed at myself then, at all of it. I tried to leave for the woods to stare at a fire, but the poets came and sat on my log, talking about the job market. True story of difficulty.

Perhaps you will understand if I tell you that I sat in the driveway for a good five minutes before getting out of the car this afternoon, wondering if I should call someone because a squirrel was looking at me funny. Finally, I honked the horn to make it go away. Then honked again.

It’s like what Virginia Woolf said—if you could see what really moves through your friends’ minds throughout the day, you’d be appalled. Once something really odd gave me the giggles in a college fiction class, and the guy sitting next to me said, “That’s exactly the kind of thing that would make her laugh.” The wave of affection I felt for myself then would appall you.

Joanna Penn Cooper

from *A Bestiary*

On the first day of class, as an ice-breaker, I had my students play Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board. In small groups, students huddled around another student who was lying on the ground, perfectly stationary. Using just two fingers to lift, they chanted, “Light as a feather, stiff as a board, light as a—” and I walked around and saw nothing happen.

“You have to believe,” I chided. “You’re not believing!”

And the students chanted, “Light as a feather, stiff—” and still nothing was happening. This was no surprise to me. It shouldn’t work.

Outside, snowflake ballerinas spun and they spun.

I said, “Come on, guys, you have to at least try!”

The students chanted, “Light as a feather, stiff as a board,” again and again—until: a girl began to lift off the ground. Her classmates’ fingers barely touched her. She was rising, as if effort and determination alone could bring forth magic. I looked over and the other group was standing and their girl was floating nearly waist high.

The students re-arranged the tables and returned to their seats.

ooooo

I call a thing “magic” if I cannot immediately understand the process by which it is made, like electricity and felt, happily ever after and swamp coolers in the desert, like discrimination and cruelty, like the residual buzz that rattles in the small of your ear when all you should hear is silence, like a threat.

ooooo

“How did that work?” I asked. “That’s not supposed to work.”

The students’ faces were bright, celebratory.

“I mean, physics tells us that you can’t lift a whole adult person off the ground using a couple of fingers and some chanting.” The heater kicked on, and its low warble invigorated me. “It’s just not possible!”

I had an entire lecture planned around why the exercise hadn’t worked: about how we as adults are too skeptical to believe in magic, about how we put all of our faith in science, which not too long ago was also a form of magic; about how we’re cynical and that’s sad; about how we can no longer access childhood wonder.

My entire lecture was obsolete.

I let the class out an hour early.

I did not need to convince them, because they already believed.

Lily Hoang

¹³⁴ Lily Hoang, "[On the first day of class...](#)" collected in [A Bestiary](#), [Cleveland State University Poetry Center](#)

On the Seventh day God says: What you've got is virgin charm & a knife in your pocket.

& I'm like, *Thanks?*

The heart finds its anchor in the sky.

The woman is told she is a tabernacle.

On the forty-third day, I confuse my hangover for grief.

God says, *Your longing will be for me, & I will dominate you.*
& I'm like, *Nope!*

The morning wears a cotton dress.

Is this all I will amount to:

The hot breath of months in my pocket?
Every telephone pole I mistook for a tree?
The melancholy suspicion of library security?

Nah.

The bartender hums the tune
of a hummingbird rising from its flower.

I say: *I inherited Sappho's pussy*
& I believe me.

God says, *Thou shalt not kill.*
& I'm like, *But what about with my eyes.*

I never asked for the capacity to love
ugly things, but here I am.

Carnation, daisy, lavender lately the lavender of late.

I boil my stock exclusively with wishbones.

I say, *I like my men smooth & far away, reticent*
as a bookshelf.

& God butts in: *I can do that for you.*

His eyes search me like a pendulum.

I've scraped a dead man's ashes out
from under my fingernails like lice eggs.

A woman raised in contest with other women is a child of God.

God says, *This is getting serious.*
& I'm like, *You bet.*

I remember my ignorance
& miss it.

The skies open silently with a woman's legs.

Morning glory, morning glory, morning hallelujah.

Katie Condon

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¹³⁵ [Katie Condon](#), "[On the Seventh day God says: What you've got is virgin charm & a knife in your pocket.](#)" in [boat](#)

Baile Gitano

The flamenco dancer's thigh was pure lust
in the flood of night moon and I realized
I'd forgotten the splendor of lunar light
as your hand seized my arm, my body.
"Things must be forgotten—" you said,
in between bites of *paella*, rice cascading down
your chin. "Forget so you can enjoy again!
Experience comes only in the unexpected."

The waiter placed a wilted rose in my hair.
Red and yellow frogs—the size of my toes
and bright as the dancer's flaring skirt—
tapped round our chairs, our sandaled feet.
They glistened exotic, but the waiter said the frogs
were commonplace—a sign of the season's end
when the bay becomes a natural humidior: No good
for *baile*. Only the tobacco leaf thrives.
Bodies slip over each other, stick to bed sheets.
Undaunted, you moved closer. Your finger found
its home under the edge of my panties
as a crisp, pomegranate-filled *empanada* arrived
on my plate and I remembered to forget
as soon as the sweet red jelly touched my tongue.

It was easy enough to let the taste of jelly
and rum escape, but I knew abstracting men
from memory was never my method.
I pressed the blade of the guillotine, cutting you
another cigar, and the round head fell
without regret to the feet of frogs.

Tana Jean Welch

Hard Child

So I had two lists of names for a girl, so
what. The president's allowed to
have two speeches, in case the hostage
comes home in a bag. The geese
in the metropark don't want
for bread crumbs, despite the signs
proclaiming the land provides them all
they need. I was a hard child, by which
I mean I was callous from the start.
Even now, were I to find myself, after
a grand disease or blast, among the pasty
scattering of survivors, there isn't one
human tradition I would choose to carry
forward. Not marking feast days, not
assembling roadside shrines, not marrying
up, not researching the colloquialism
STATEN ISLAND DIVORCE, not
representing paste pearls as the real
things, not recounting how the advent
of photography altered painting,
souring us on the acrylic portrait, thrust us
toward the abstract, sent us seeking
to capture in oil that which film would
never be wasted on: umbrella stands,
unlovely grates, assorted drains, body casts.
I typically hate discussing the past
and treasure the option, rarer and rarer,
to turn from it, as when K.'s twins
were born and one of them
nearly died—I don't even remember which,
that's how much they got better.

Natalie Shapero

¹³⁷ [Natalie Shapero](#), "[Hard Child](#)," in [Gulf Coast](#), collected in [Hard Child](#), [Copper Canyon](#)

Midsummer

On the balcony across
the courtyard, a Japanese girl sprays
her mother's tea roses
with an old perfume bottle
full of faucet water, then wets
her bangs and smoothes them back
under her barrettes. It hasn't rained—
smoke chews through the bridges
on the east banks, and I curse
the slices of contrails
in the sky, their icy altitudes, and all
that fresh flight. The girl's cheeks
are radish colored
from the heat, dripping
sweat. She leans across the rail
and reads the grass
where sprinklers tear their single sentence
into mist.

Gregory Lawless

Plastic Cookie

Like a teapot, I'm tipped to spill from my kettle snout
some silver tears, these few drops that glow and drip

their arrows down into the ground from off my eyes
and nose. I was going to send back the plastic cookie

fallen from your daughter's false stove, her pretend
kitchenette, into the net compartment that opens up

beneath my daughter's stroller when its pink flower
is broken open, which I discovered upon landing in

Newark, to push my nervy daughter along bright
airport corridors so that we might be reunited with

our luggage. My orange suitcase pops its atrocity out
from that mystery mouth that spills onto the metallic

fins that spool around, and I run to clutch at it, heave
its weight. Yet, just yesterday, it sat fat in your room,

contents sprung: underwear, diapers. The both of us
fearful for our respective daughters, too deep, perhaps,

in love with our singular daughters, drinking late into
the night, speaking of our daughters. Earlier, furious

your fearsome daughter pulled her entire plastic kitchen
down, crashed it to the floor, as if toppling a bookshelf

with the simple tug of a hand. Daughters astonishing
daughters! Mine with her dish-wash hair, plate eyes

full of gray-blues, wanting to play with your daughter's
stove, the plastic kettles, tea cups. Still little, wobbling

all over the room. Then dusk sat its fat ass down at last.
To our great relief, we found our daughters deep asleep,

and were free to drink the rum of us, which was, as it
always had been, a gradual drink. And you know what

you know with your hands, wish the night blacker since
blackest is forever. Who'd believe I'd be dropping such

bells of tears now, to hear them ring inside the earth that
absorbs them? Let us not hand down this history to our

daughters. Let's ignore what a plastic cookie means to us,
or for that matter why your daughter had one in the first

place. Forget your daughter's pale glare in that doorway's
3 a.m.: innocent us lying underneath and atop one another

on your lousy futon. Denier, liar, totem. You'd given me
a plastic cookie. No. You and your daughter gave me and

my daughter a plastic cookie. You cannot now comfort me.
So disown me. The soil is free. Within it lives all that matters.

One day, I'll see you down there. Daughter-free.

Cate Marvin

Supplication with Rabbit Skull and Bouquet

take me by the elbow

can you see the bones left in my ear

our messiahs are blowing us kisses from heaven

they speak in the continental longhand

the doubt between us hangs like a moon

there is no such thing as certainty

the spell cast in the night was just a hard wind

your cup is still full of poison

whose blood is this on the bedsheets

not that cross

I'm thankful for your beaded carapace

I am a grown man

excuse the buttery light haloing my head

I lack money

can you help me with any of this

you have swallowed so much already

the fire under my bed is quiet as a fossil

I trust completely whatever's in your body

visit me at home where ghosts will watch us from the closet

take me by force

can you see the boy's name cut in my bark

our messiahs are hopeless and modern

they speak only in our sleep

the doubt between us stickies up our tongues

there is no such thing as sorcery

the spell cast on your cup was just a heap of words

your cup was never there at all

whose blood is this on the cross

not any cross you know

I'm thankful for your yellow pills

I am growing into my science

excuse the rabbit skull crunching in my teeth

I lack sexual preference

can you help me shrink back to a dainty mouth

you have swallowed even my bouquet of corn and straw

the fire under my bed is simple as a bed

I trust completely whatever's in your pockets

visit me at home and pin your money to my skin

Kaveh Akbar

¹⁴⁰ Kaveh Akbar, "Supplication with Rabbit Skull and Bouquet," in *Poem-a-Day*, collected in *Calling a Wolf a Wolf*, Alice James

"I was popular in certain circles"

Among the river rats and the leaves.
For example. I was huge among the lichen,
and the waterfall couldn't get enough
of me. And the gravestones?
I was hugely popular with the gravestones.
Also with the meat liquefying
beneath. I'd say to the carrion birds,
I'd say, *Are you an eagle? I can't see
so well.* That made them laugh until we
were screaming. Eagle. Imagine.

The vultures loved me so much they'd feed
me the first morsel. From their delicate
talons, which is what I called them:
such delicate talons. They loved me so deeply
they'd visit in pairs. One to feed me.
One to cover my eyes with its velvety wings.
Which were heavy as theater curtains. Which I was
sure to remark on. *Why can't I see what I'm eating?*
I'd say. And the wings would pull me into
the great bird's chest. And I'd feel the nail
inside my mouth.

What pals I was with all the scavengers!
And the dead things too. What pals.
As for the living, the fox would not be outdone.
We'd sit on the cliff's edge and watch the river
like a movie and I'd say, *I think last night...*
and the fox would put his paw on top of mine
and say, *Forget it. It's done.* I mean,
we had fun. You haven't lived until a fox
has whispered something the ferns told him
in your one good ear. I mean truly.
You have not lived.

Gabrielle Calvocoressi

¹⁴¹ Gabrielle Calvocoressi, "[I was popular in certain circles](#)," in [The Awl](#), collected in [Rocket Fantastic](#), [Persea](#)

Praise House: The New Economy

—after and for Ross Gay

The rosemary bush blooming
its unabashed blue. Also dumplings
filled with steam and soup
so my mouth fills and I bubble
over with laughter. Little things.
People kissing on bicycles.
Being able to walk up the stairs
and run back down.
Joanna's garden after the long flight
to Tel Aviv. Not being detained
like everyone thought I would.
The man with dreadlocks
and a perfect green shirt walking home
from work. One cold beer
before I drink it and get sick.
How peaches mold into compost in a single day:
orange to gray to darkness into dirt.
Her ankle's taste. The skin
right under the knob, delicate
as a tomatillo's shroud. All the animals
that talk to me. That I finally let them
talk to me. The blessing of waking
early enough to watch the fox
bathe itself. The suction of a man's hands
meeting another's on the street.
Every single person looking up
to see them. Bros, yes. But lovely
in the golden light with brims swung
to the back. I want shoulders like
they have. Want my waist to taper
to an ass built like the David's. I admit it:
this body's not enough for me.
Still I love it. Al B Sure blasting
out a Nissan Sentra's windows.
Bowties. Ridiculous blues.
My mother's seizures—specifically
that I don't have them.
That I can answer Ross' call
or not because we live Harmonious
and are always talking somehow.
Tapestries with their gluttony of deer.
Fig perfume and also cypress.
Boxer briefs and packing socks
in jockey shorts. Strap ons.
Soft and hard. Welcome in her hand
and in mine as I greet the real me.
The little shop in Provincetown.

And the speckled dog that licks itself
in that fresco of the crucifixion.
Mary Oliver. I love her. I really do.
The baseball she gave me
that says, *Go Sox!* Though, I love
the Orioles. Old Bay on all my shrimp.
And justice. And cities burning
if people need to burn them to get free.
My grandmother gardening
in the late light. Sun Ra. The first time.
Paris, even though I've never been
there. Natal plums. Tattoos everlasting:
Clouds. Orion's belt. Pushing inside her
with both hands holding myself
up. My weight. Her grabbing and saying,
God. Fuck. The neighbors.
Casablanca. Not knowing anything.
Angels. Mashed potatoes. Good red wine.

Gabrielle Calvocoressi

¹⁴² Gabrielle Calvocoressi, "[Praise House: The New Economy](#)," in [The American Poetry Review](#), collected in [Rocket Fantastic](#), [Persea](#)

Bad Decisions

I'm not hungry. I'm wearing
these shoes. I'll have
another drink. Here's
my credit card. I'm
not wearing a bra. I'm
not brushing my hair. I
am going to be a poet. I am going
down this slide.

Jill McDonough

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¹⁴³ [Jill McDonough](#), "[Bad Decisions](#)," collected in [Reaper](#), [Alice James](#)

Girls in Bed

You are in bed
and Antigone's dead

once again though offstage
and alive on the previous page

doomed proud girl
elective fatalist

& the dark Doñas
and perved-out girls

are facing off
at the Met

Velázquez vs. Balthus

and you know who
wins. A sleeping

woman is an erotic
thing in many a painting

and Albertine sleeps
away it seems

a million days
as Proust swerves

ever unto a swerving
desire. But/And I

you are sleeping
and no one's painting

or writing or looking
You're sleeping by the cat

in another room
and Sinatra croons a tune

"as charming as hell even yet"
on NPR. Where we are

isn't fixed by any GPS
or pinpointed location

can't be mapped by street name
city state or nation

O the drift as between
America and Europe

as between girls
in bed and girls dead

The vast Atlantic
suddenly reveals

itself a thin
watery thing covering

a continental shelf
An Atlantean upsurge

cracks the abyssal plain
proves what looks sundered

is so deep under linked

Maureen N. McLane

¹⁴⁴ Maureen N. McLane, "[Girls in Bed](#)," in [The Paris Review](#), collected in [Some Say](#), Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Blue Over Orange

October's first cold day & when I get in the car
my breath forms a brief chrysanthemum
on the inside of the windshield & I'm aware,

suddenly, of all the yellow leaking from the world,
the lost green veins of the leaves. On my list
of errands the last stop is the video store where

the movies I watched in college are now classified
as *Cult Favorites or Classics* & the beautiful boy
who works the counter rolls his eyes when I take out

the Truffaut for the dozenth time. *Not again*, he says.
He's nice to everyone, but he sees me, if he sees me at all,
as an adult woman in a dark coat, with an expensive bag.

We touch only when we exchange money. The lobby
of a narrow French apartment, an allée of poplars:
those are scenes from a movie, not my life. I'm unlikely

to rent the movies that excite him: Japanese animation,
a documentary on mountain climbing, seventies concert films
from before he was born. Hours later, at home

with my glass of bourbon, he's with me still, & I think,
out of nowhere I tell myself, about how when I was thirteen
& we lived overseas I saw middle-aged NCOs

with beer guts & sunburned scalps walking the streets
of San Angeles City, holding the hands of girls
not much older than I was, girls paid to be adoring,

who covered their mouths when they giggled
& wore strange yellow nylons the color of no human skin.
When we'd walk down those streets, my friends & I,

our raffia bags stuffed with devalued pesos,
Filipino boys would sit on their haunches & make
wet clucking sounds at us. Back then I imagined the misery

of the teenaged prostitutes, though not in any detail,
& the men's daughters stateside, reading
Tiger Beat in their rooms, trying on Yardley lipstick.

Later I thought about the wives, left behind
at Lackland or Minot or Clovis, the scent
of coffee, Salems, Emeraude, & something that may

or may not have been history pushing them to the sides
of their own lives; now I think of the men—
how little of life turns out to be a choice, after all,

& the way those choices we do make
can transform beauty into pathos or desire
into commerce. We are, all of us, almost alike.

Aleda Shirley

¹⁴⁵ Aleda Shirley, "[Blue over Orange](#)," collected in [Dark Familiar](#), [Sarabande](#)

Divas' Division

When I was on the road I didn't eat. I threw up at every show, but no one seemed to notice. Your shelf life only lasts until you're 30. I was 26, spent half my pay on Botox and bigger lips. My implants made it hard to lift my arms. Women who came up on their own don't like us very much. They think we're getting a free ride. My trainer wouldn't teach me how to fall, said I was used to being on my back. If we don't know what we're doing, we're easier to fire. My bruises wouldn't heal. I covered them with makeup so I wouldn't look tough. Guys in the locker room aren't used to hearing no. When you get called a slut, you have to laugh it off. My angles always involved men—who thought I was hot, broke my heart or learned I was a whore. My boyfriend complained about my schedule, so the office let me go. They figured he'd just date another Diva. My hair was falling out. I took so many Xanax I got lost backstage. At the end of my first year, I couldn't catch my breath, move fast enough for matches. I was afraid I'd die if I kept going. Quitting was the hardest thing I've ever done.

Carrie Shippers

Confession

At first, pain arrives wearing my own face, and I welcome her because I am lonely. I walk with her along the wooded path in the park behind the empty house, the dog snout-deep in the wet-matted leaves, and I tell her *over there he kissed me, hard* and she inhales. *I've been here with you before*, she says. She gets me drunk in Boston, runs her hands over the bar: *you looked past me here, too*, she says. *You only wanted to see his face.*

The confessional poet risks only what she's willing to admit. *I use the personal*, wrote Sexton, *when I am applying a mask to my face.*

Because you will no longer touch me, I let pain instruct me. I bind my fingers together in the shape of an oath before I place them between my legs. In my imagination a single mouth lowers itself down my breasts and stomach in a perfectly straight line. I pretend I cannot recognize the mouth, the face, but I weaken and soon I am finished, bound prone into myself. I wake hours later and my fingers are white and cold and numb. When I return them to their starting place, they feel almost like someone else's hands.

The confessional poet never discloses which of her stories are true. Some of her stories are entirely true, but all of her stories could be untrue. This self-protection sometimes looks like fraud. *I use the personal*, wrote Sexton, *when I am applying a mask to my face. Like a rubber mask that the robber wears.*

Pain hears me call her name, for I have named her, and she turns around. She resembles me less the closer I allow her. Some nights I awaken to her hands moving inside of me, her mouth pressed against my neck. You'd always ask me *how does this make you feel? how does this make you feel?* each time we fucked. *How do I make you feel, Rachel. How do I make you feel.* Pain doesn't ask, for she already knows the answer.

The confessional poet risks more if she is a woman. Of Sexton, the critic John Simon wrote *one of her symptoms was a preternatural need to be loved by everyone all the time*. He wrote *Sexton managed to function in some ways and keep teaching, writing, falling in love, having affairs — anything to keep her poetic juices flowing*. He imagined her suicide as a kind of poem. *In the end*, Simon wrote of Sexton, *it is the poetry that matters.*

Pain leaves, and in her absence I dig my hands into my skin and nobody responds. I chase the escaped dog through the park as the sun sets because I forgot to close the door. I forget my gloves and hat and scarf and jacket and shoes and socks and run exposed through the snow because I have forgotten I possess a body. When I realize I am cold, a stranger has bent over me, blocking the waning light, the dog a shivering comma beside us. *Who are you* she asks me. *Is this your dog? Who are you. Where do you belong.*

Rachel Mennies

Handsome Man

Handsome man who rides in to save me, I'm ready
for all manner of rewarding. I have kept
this pressed handkerchief scented with the most precious
of exotic oils in the fold of my sleeve. I'm going
to drop it. I'm going to thank you so hard — oh, oh,
no, I did not mean — of course, of course, certain standards,
protocols, I only meant — Absolutely.

Let's start again. Handsome man
who rides in to save me, I'm ready
to step down from this post to which a dragon
has tied me, despite a total lack of opposable thumbs,
and swoon into your arms like this,
see how limp? I've been working on my lax
muscle tone, I've been flexing my can'ts
and helpless cries, just last month I
couldn't escape from a blanket I awakened under,
it took hours, that's how good

I damsel. Handsome man who rides in to save me,
I have been watching you from atop this hill
as you fought your way past that wild boar
which may have been a hog and that wall of thorns
which may have been a hedge, and that witch
who wanted you to be kind to old women but you showed her
what was what. You have conquered young and old,

and my heart, handsome man who rides in to save me,

you've truly — oh, I see, this is more of a platonic

sort of rescue, you're more in it for the prestige.

You and The Black Knight have a competition — uh huh.

Right. Ok. No, it's fine. It's fine.

Handsome man who rides in to save me — look, I get it,

there's no need to be a dick about it, Handsome man who rides

in to save me, not all of us were born pretty. Some of us
have had to cultivate a personality. Uh huh. Uh huh. Sure.

I bet she said that. I bet you've got a lot of high ratings
from other princesses. You know what? You know what,

handsome man who rides into save me? I think I'm just going

to stay here. Yeah. With the dragon.

I'm just going to swoon by myself. Look at me

swooooooooooning. Yeah. Like that. Like that? That's right.

That's right. Ride away. That's what you're good at. Ride away!

Rebecca Hazelton

Good

The other night I learned that there is something
called the glare of an egg
It's the liquid that becomes a film at the boiling point
that connects the egg to its shell
and I said,
but isn't the shell part of the egg too?
Good, my friend said
as though it was.
I said I seemed to be well-suited for living
much to my chagrin
It's not hard to die, my friend said.
You could drown in a puddle
Have you tried?
That night I tried to seize the day
and slip gently into the water
but even though my eyes were closed
my nose was open
I smelled the sea inside my own skull
and surfaced exasperated
Tonight I made myself a dress out of butcher paper
They say old seamstresses used to do that
when they were practicing
or might as well have anyway
I could not perform the brutal act
It's not so easy, I said
making pleats in the sunshine
Are you an angel? he said
and I said no, I'm just backlit
from this angle, I said,
everyone could be an angel

Larisa Svirsky

Looking at Men

after Iliana Rocha

The world teaches us there's nothing to see here,
only everything that matters. The world
teaches us to fear what desires us: a matter
of survival. The world's pedagogy
has not evolved lately, all armpit hair & biceps
& bigger is better. Doesn't matter
if a man's wearing a three-piece that costs more
than your car or a neon vest or a prison jumpsuit,
he has a right to the space you occupy.

A memory: junior-high baseball tryouts,
this boy making fun of my name.
He was a running back & special-teams star,
fast & strong & angry all the time,
popular & dangerous; he'd die of heart failure
at forty-two but of course we didn't know that.
On this day all that mattered was that we both knew
he would be the starting center fielder
once he'd finished shredding me. It's how
things work. How they have always worked.
When I tried ignoring him, willing myself
invisible & mute, he dropped his glove
& jogged toward me, spitting profanity.
We were boys but he saw what it meant
to be a man: no problem aggression
can't solve, flex & fist, cock & rock
& stomp out weakness. I did not make
the team that year, or the next.

In porn, the men are supposed to be
invisible—who wants to focus on that dangle
& flop & hairy flesh—women are the centerpiece—
& yet it is the men whose pleasure matters,
whose erection lets us know it's time to begin,
whose ejaculation lets us know what success
looks like. This is what the world teaches us,
& I'm exempt from nothing. I love muscles
swelling under sleeves. A beer gut
means you make the rules; hairy forearms
are a ticket to all the backrooms in all the land.

Another junior-high memory: selecting
the yearbook who's who, most likely to
& all that. Asked to vote for best-looking guy,
I picked the starting quarterback,
a dark-haired boy who treated me with contempt.
He was taller than I, stronger, a better athlete,
at ease on the planet. Once I sat behind him
in the bleachers at a high school game while he made out
with a dance-squad girl. She caught me watching,
smirked *Do you have a problem?* Well, sure,
who doesn't, but of course I said nothing,
looked away, chastened & hungry. It was her
I wanted but him I envied. There is zero chance
this man remembers me, but here I am:
not being him still shapes what I think of myself.

I cannot believe how stupid I am. I cannot believe
I'm more than halfway through with this life
& still molded out of ninth-grade humiliations.
I do not dare to admit weakness. I cannot
tell the truth about want. I am not
this body. I am not this sex. I am not
strong enough to be anything else.

Amorak Huey

My 1985

I wasn't a math star, but one or two of my new friends were.
I liked to work into casual conversation

fusillades of words like *nexus* and *tensor*.
The counsellor from the department of recreation

said I had the voice of an angry thirty-year-old.
I thought I had a "penetrating gaze";

kids thought I was staring at them. I had to be told.
After that, I imagined I lived on the moon for two days;

I stood out and hid there, a demented sentry
from an awkwarder parallel world, a young Bizarro.

On our class trip to the beach and the World of Tomorrow,
the boys were igneous. I was sedimentary:

I set out to lie with the other girls on the low dunes
before the morning heat got metamorphic.

They folded their towels and moved off, so I closed
my eyes on the hypothesis that it would make me calmer.

In the talent show, I played piano for Annabelle's show tunes
(we rehearsed extra for passages marked "improvise")

then sang "Take a Pebble" by Emerson, Lake and Palmer.
They thought I was caterwauling. I thought I was Orphic.

Stephanie Burt

¹⁵¹ [Stephanie Burt](#), "[My 1985](#)," in [The New Yorker](#), collected in [Advice from the Lights](#), [Graywolf](#)

The Integrity of Matter

There's blood on the page before this one. See?
The dark kicks up. Air torques. Rain tasers the skin.

What did Ginsberg say? That he wrote poems to tell
his version of things in a world that only tells versions

of power? How many days do we have, after all.
A tornado touches down in the next town north.

My heart iambs to some ancient classic—maybe Jackson
Browne, maybe Stylistics. I totter at the St. Vrain Creek

where it bursts from the Rockies. Cottonwoods catch me.
When the child who lives in this house is away his toys

grieve. Thomas the Train is speechless and the mottled
ball sits still. I forget the name of the film where a woman

walks into walls in hopes of entering the womb of an atom.
The child's atoms are here, even as he climbs into the next

plane home. What a big open space I am. The way these
electrons come together, you'd think I was real.

Maureen Seaton

¹⁵² [Maureen Seaton](#), "[The Integrity of Matter](#)," in [Posit](#)

Strip Poker

I'm giving blood and looking at a magazine photo
of bosomy Ava Gardner next to that squirt Sinatra
and remember saying, "Want to play strip poker?"
to my mom when I was eight because I thought it was a game,
not a way to get naked, and was ready to put on
lots of layers that hot July evening—
pj's, raincoat, my patrolboy's belt
with the badge I was so proud of—and figuring
my mom would do the same with her clothes:

the cotton dresses she taught fifth grade in
over the jeans and boots she wore for gardening
and, on top of everything, the long coat she wore
when she went out with my dad on cool nights
and the ratty mink stole her rich sister had given her.
My dad looked up from his newspaper, looked down again.
My mother looked up from her book, looked down again,
looked up again, said, "No, thank you, darling,"
which is how it was in our house:

no yelling, no explanation, even,
just the assumption that you were a smart kid,
you could figure things out on your own,
like "no, thanks" meant "no, but thank you anyway"
and not "zero thanks," or that the K-9 corps
was so-called because K-9 = canine,
i.e., wasn't just some arbitrary government code—
which is good, I guess, because if people
aren't constantly explaining stuff to you

when you're a kid, then you grow up mentally active,
though also doubting everything,
even yourself, because if you're the one
who comes up with the answers,
then what the hell good are they?
Which is the kind of thing that led
Kafka to ask, "What have I in common I
with the Jews? I have hardly anything
in common with myself,"

and might have led Stalin to ask,
“What have I in common with other human beings,”
only he was too busy coming up
with rules such as this one for the Union
of Soviet Composers:
“The main attention of the Soviet composer
must be directed toward
the victorious progressive principles of reality, toward all
that is heroic, bright, and beautiful.”

But what about all that is cowardly,
dull, and ugly? Tightrope-walker Karl Wallenda:
“To be on the wire is life;
the rest is waiting.” But there’s much more waiting
than wire-walking, so what are we
supposed to do when we’re on the ground? Someone,
not Henry James, I think,
but one of those Henry James kind of guys—
cultured, reticent,

well-off but not too—said a gentleman
was a person who never knowingly made
anyone else uncomfortable, which is a good idea,
although one you can take too far,
because one of those old smart Greeks, maybe Sophocles,
said it was better never to be born,
and think how comfortable that would make everybody,
because if you weren’t born, you couldn’t bother anyone,
especially yourself!

“Are you a runner, Mr. Kirby?” asks Melba
the blood-bank nurse, who has two fingers
on my right wrist and one eye on her watch
and the other on me, who says,
no, he’s not a runner, though he does a lot
of yard work, and why does she want to know,
and Melba says, “Because you have a pulse of fifty,
and if you have a pulse of fifty and you’re not a runner,
often that means you’re dead,”

which, sooner or later,
I will be, will be naked again, sans pj’s,
raincoat, belt and badge, everything.
The blood leaps from a vein in my elbow,
pools in a plastic sack, and I’m a little whiter
than I was when I read that Ava Gardner said,
“Deep down, I’m pretty superficial”—
deep down, Ava darling, we’re all pretty superficial,
and beautiful, too, in or out of our clothes.

David Kirby

¹⁵³ [David Kirby](#), “[Strip Poker](#),” collected in [The House of Blue Light](#), [LSU](#)

Freshbaby

“Will you drink teeny bottles of coconut rum,
and value a hot tub?” asks Baby.
We’re exhuming our pierced-navel youth.
We spend our time biting our pen caps,
writing flurries of ballpoint and college-ruled
love notes behind the solar-system
shower curtain dividing our shared room.
We bake a black forest cake for German class
but it proves somehow plagued with ants,
an irreparable social downer. We wish to be rid
of the man with the mustache and his beagle,
named Pluto, which sealed the deal of our vernal disdain.
“Might you sleep with Kelly Michaels’s
older brother? I once saw him ketchup his eggs.”
No one’s parents are ever home. It’s a good question.
Biology textbooks and long lonely walks,
caffeine pills and wet-haired older waiters,
two-liters with the labels torn off:
that’s what teen-Babies are made of.
And the right kind of flare in one’s jeans.
“How about Joe Palomino?”
For the lack of cable one night we settle in
to watch VHS porn we found in tin
buckets in the attic. We revert to being so dumb
we believe our stomachaches idiopathic.
We tear the sleeves off our T-shirts and Sun-In our hair.
“Looks good.” We ride bikes but we wear
our helmets. Everything smells like wet asphalt.

Sarah Trudgeon

Welcome to the Jungle

With champagne I try expired white ones
I mean pills I mean men

I think I'm going crazy sometimes really
you think I'm joking I'm never joking

All Men Have Been Created Equally
To Shiver At The Thought Of Me

is something I used to think but forgot
or got drunk tried smoking something new

put on a wig made a scene threw up
in someone's living room cooked

too much food every time can someone just
give it to me when I get home

I know the answer is probably cleavage
cleavage all the boys I know

holding my arms down taking off
my bracelets with their white hands

I've pissed on a sidewalk in midtown watched
a Joan Crawford movie at dawn

art is nice but the question is how are you
making money are you for sale

people in movies are always saying
I can't live like this! packing a little bag

or throwing down their forks I mean it
one of these days my whole body might just

go away like just standing in line
at Whole Foods or Purgatory I wish I were

a dream for you to suck on
once I got four tattoos

cut off all my hair
died my hair blonde

had a party had fifty parties
looked for Jupiter and Venus in the smog

painted and repainted my nails
what can they do for you sir

the question is where the fuck
is the sun the answer is tip-toe

into the park at midnight pretend
it's green like home

Morgan Parker

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¹⁵⁵ [Morgan Parker](#), "[Welcome to the Jungle](#)," in [Prelude](#), collected in [There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé](#), [Tin House](#)

What Doesn't Kill You

What doesn't kill you only makes you
reconsider, later, whether
calling your barbarian of a neighbor

a barbarian
was really a good first stab
at honesty or just low tolerance
to the new medication.

Death, after all, is a possible side effect.

* * *

Being human, there's something flighty
with your compass, something flinty
with your lighter.

* * *

Joy is one of those things you save for the hobby store,
those blessed moments of peace in the presence
of the little man with the white sandwich
on the little bench outside the train depot
built to some absurd scale
you could only be a demigod.

* * *

Repainting is never a solution.

* * *

The fox with its snout stuffed
in a flower is not a figure
for nostalgia.

It is simply his moment alone
without the hounds and the fat men
on horseback chasing close behind.

A moment of solace
in a game called How Far Can You Run
Before You Burst Into Flames?

Steve Mueske

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¹⁵⁶ Steve Mueske, "[What Doesn't Kill You](#)," in *Typo*

Body Image

At a party I am staring
at a gigantic cardboard cutout
of Beyoncé that's across the room,
realizing I will never be what I want
to be. I get drunk enough to forget
my aspirations and go home
unfucked and hungry, smear
my makeup and pass out to a movie
about the end of the world.
If I could bathe I totally would,
but the future is here and everything
must be destroyed. My problem
is that the only thing I'm good
at destroying is my body, a vessel
I wreck again and again like a car
in a video game programmed
to ignore the physics of death.
They say the asteroid will be here
in two weeks, so I'm making
a moonlight raid on the boy's village.
At night they know all hips
are great—they can
take shelter under mine.

Colette Arrand

To the Wolves

For Violet, Magnolia (died March 16, 2004)

How you must have suffered getting accustomed to
the void—alone in the soothing silk pod of my womb.
Violet, Magnolia. Violet, Magnolia. I loved to say it.
Not alone entirely, but alone. I wonder did your ears

notice the telltale cadence of only one underwater heart
beating? Could you, with your tiny legs and fingers, which
you liked to put into your mouth, feel the still ribs and skull
full of your sister's body? You were always the strong one.

They say that's true of all twins—there is always the one
who is slightly sturdier, slightly bigger, inching ahead in the
race to birth's finish line. You might have assumed, balanced
as you were in that bubble of loss and life, that something

terrible was wrong. You were to be my fourth born, surely
Magnolia—your silent twin—would have been fifth. How many
years I'd suffered, the flare of Lupus catching in my body
like a grass fire, wreaking havoc on my entire being.

Elbows, knees, fingers, even the tiny joints of my toes
scabbed over with that terrible, purple-red rash, turning
to brown, the mark of the ravaged wolf appearing on
my face. With each flare up I'd become almost elderly

in my gait and pace, until the rashes scabbed over
hard, turned dark hard russet, fell off. It was then, at the end
of that flare up, when I went to hear your heartbeats. I heard
yours, but your twin was already gone. Still I wanted you

something fierce. More, now. I worried and fretted and
tortured myself into the ground with every metaphor
on earth for the word *decay*. I have three healthy babies
(two still in diapers) I'd tell myself, peering

into the mirror. For weeks my face stayed clear. Every morning
I'd rise, look, say to my reflection *I have three healthy babies*
as if it were some sort of guarantee. I was, after all, the
world's most annoying pregnant person—no hint of

morning sickness, ankles lean as fine birch branches, hair twice
as thick and shining like sunlight, not a stretch mark in sight.
I prepared your room—took out the second crib and
brought in a big green leather rocking chair, imagined sitting

there, nursing you, looking out on the hundred yards of bayou
emptying into salty, wide open gulf, the waters merging,
the creatures staying mainly to one side, the other.
I have three healthy babies, I said again, not realizing

my husband stood in the closet not three feet away.
From behind the door: *Get over it*. And so I did, decided
to block your twin from my mind, shove her memory
away like so many fallen Magnolia trees, lost in piles

of roadside debris. I gained weight. My father died.
I finished your lilac nursery. I bought a set of old glass
and steel doctor's shelves and filled them with
treasures: a stuffed dog, perfect pinecone, a row

of your grandparent's bronzed baby shoes, a small
collection of heart-shaped rocks. My father sent you
an antique doll, with a porcelain face painted
all innocence, and a fine lace gown to cover

the rest of her. I waited. I mourned. I slept well.
March thirty-first I began to bleed. My husband
came home from his shift at the hospital
and found me on the silver-blue bedroom divan,

crying,
holding my belly.
What's wrong?
Blood.

He called a colleague from the other room, came back, said
We'll go over tomorrow first thing. Sleepless the whole night,
bleeding: he snored. Crossing west on the Biloxi Bridge by dawn:
I already knew. There was not just one dead baby, now there

were two. Magnolia, and you. It was too late for surgery—they
thought it best to induce. As I felt your big head
crowning, the doctor said, *Oh, she's blonde just like you,*
honey, and we smiled at one another. My husband cussed

under his breath, left the room. I held you both a while.
Violet, Magnolia. You were three times as big as Magnolia, she
looked something awful, her face by now deformed, her skin
the color of ruin. The next day, I sat in the pale purple nursery

at home and told my sweet three that you had
gone to God with Papa. They kept saying *APRIL FOOLS!*
APRIL FOOLS! and *APRIL FOOLS!* as if the news was
some kind of trick, until they noticed their mama's tears.

The oldest whispered *She's an angel now* in her girly pouty baby voice. The next morning, as we were sitting at the formal dining table for breakfast, all of us dressed finer than the nines as usual, as if nothing had happened, we heard him call

to the kids from the back veranda. *Look kids! See?*
In his hands he held a minuscule baby hummingbird, dead.
He said, *Look at the violet of her throat and dark eyes, doesn't she look sad?* The kids, in habit, nodded

and recoiled. *This is like what Mama did to Violet.*
I gathered them to me, scurried them off to the shady National Seashore behind our house. Walking through the woods, in a hushed row behind me, the kids were nearly

soundless. Their footsteps fell like the steps of wolves. I felt the familiar burn rise up in me, felt my joints scabbing over, the mask of the wolf appearing on my face. A fox crossed our path, the broken-wing distraction call

of killdeer filled the canopy of savannah pine, singing *Kill-dee-dee Kill-dee-dee Kill-dee-dee* a frenzied lullaby.
As we passed the flat muddy bayou bank, a young alligator didn't bother to flinch and neither did we.

At the end of the trail, we found our way to the wall of the bridge, threw aside shoes, dipped in our feet. The bayou passed beneath us into open Gulf, the sun went down. In the profound haze of dusk, we didn't

even see the bottlefish floating in the tidal marsh, didn't notice the fully-inflated blue-violet sail skimming the surface, didn't suspect the mass of jellyfish-like tangles underneath. Bottlefish are not jellyfish: they are

an entire damn colony, four kinds of minute, highly modified subterranean souls, each needing the other to survive. That bottlefish stung my girl something fierce, leaving whip-like red welts on her alabaster leg.

The four of us made time, then, and I carried her, howling in pain, toward the light of our kitchen window, the bottle of vinegar waiting, back up the dark woodsy Nature's Way Trail, home; my two small boys following close behind.

Alice Anderson

¹⁵⁸ Alice Anderson, "[To the Wolves](#)," collected in [The Watermark](#), [Eyewear](#)

The Cure for Melancholy is to Take the Horn

Powdered unicorn horn was once thought to cure melancholy.

What carries the hurt is never the wound
but the red garden sewn by the horn
as it left—and she left. I am rosing,
blooming absence, its brilliant alarum.

Brotsky said, *Darkness restores what light cannot—
repair*. You thrilled me—opened to the comb.
O, wizard, O, wound. I want the ebon bull and the moon—
I've come for the honeyed horn.

Queen Elizabeth traded a castle for a single horn.
Surrender to the kingdom in my hands—
army of touch marching upon the alcazar
of your thighs like bright horns.

I arrive at you—half bestia, half feast.
Tonight we harvest the luxed forest
of Caderas, name the darkful fruit
spicing our mouths, separate sweet from thorn.

Lanternist, in your wicked palm,
the bronzed lamp of my breast. Strike the sparker—
take me with tremble. Into your lap
let me lay my heavy horns.

I fulfilled the prophecy of your throat,
loosed in you the fabulous wing of my mouth—
red holy-red ghost. I spoke to god,
returned to you feathered, seraphimed and horned.

Our bodies are nothing if not places to be had by,
as in, *God, she has me by the throat,
by the hip bone, by the moon. God,
she has me by the horn.*

Natalie Diaz

¹⁵⁹ Natalie Diaz, "[The Cure for Melancholy is to Take the Horn](#)," in [The Paris-American](#)

The Driest Place on Earth

I watched in horror as the man hung
half a pig by a hook in the window.

Nearby, the sea shone or something.
Nearby, the wingspan of a hawk cast an elongated shadow.

I listened with horror to the words I was missing.
A wrongness was growing in the living moon.

& nearby, the sea rolled endlessly.
Nearby, the saw grass peered through the grit & preened.

I've never been to Florida. Louisiana however
is second skin of mind, a habit-habitat.

& Texas on the way there, the red soil
& black boars, the frankly haunted pines

lone men in pickups fishing
for nothing they intend to catch.

& nearby, the sea froths over the edge.
& nearby, the sea.

Nearer & nearer
the obliterating sea

Shanna Compton

Ceremony for a Bystander

Listen, I am returning to where you are.

Wisteria, wisteria,
asleep on the stalk,
show me how to keep
the mouth soft.

Inside, wasps

are building cornices in the dust
and not one accurate place
in the silence.

Marni Ludwig

from *Chelate*

my philosophers are all in love with one another : disturbing, bizarre associations result from their couplings : forays into polyamorous activity : this approaches scientific inquiry : if four philosophers suddenly orgasm, then freak downpour in cairo : why has no one warned me : the wind takes my hat away : i chase it like i chase conclusions : being, matter, nothingness : ideal, will, order : someone better kiss me right now ::

Jay Besemer

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¹⁶² Jay Besemer, "[my philosophers are all in love with one another](#)," collected in [Chelate](#), [Brooklyn Arts](#)

Ars Poetica Battle Rhyme for Sucker Emcees

after Adrian Matejka

Who shall not be named.
Who shall not be coveted
beyond whatever
well-mannered Hot 100-
UK List. (You pick.)
Who, keep it real, may not
even exist after this
riff, after this rift. Who,
you may not even claim
ten years from this
line when finally the mic
splits from his mitts—
Check it: anyone can strum
da DUM da DUM (no SHIT)
on a ceremonial lute.
Even a classically trained
orangutan, though
most of you be absolutely
abecedarian. Parakeets:
Dactyls. Basic
Bitches, Simpleton Sarah's
& disco loops. Yo!
you gave up on the moon
for a tweed suit &
elbow patches.
Does your heart also
beat watch-slow,
in perfectly fixed
patterns? Does your stroke
not stroke? Poor you.
Who me?
I be your organic turkey
on steroids. LL—
straight swole, & *hard*
as hell. Bigger. Blacker.
Deafer, you are auto-
tune & I've already
pressed mute.
I be the Anti-wack
ODB. Big Baby Jesus,
Osiris. Bet your wife
might like it. The anti-
virus to your metrics,
flexin'. Got mine honest.
God-given. Got yours, too.

Marcus Wicker

¹⁶³ [Marcus Wicker](#), "[Ars Poetica Battle Rhyme for Sucker Emcees](#)," in [jubilat](#), collected in [Silencer](#), [Houghton Mifflin Harcourt](#)

blowjob

Toutes les dames boivent gratuitement read the sign on the door,
so I, sixteen, not yet a whomever,
or an unopened letter in a broken dresser,
did & so more
of the more of the sad
same story:
he was tall, blond, white as an allegory,
a catch that had
caught me, which makes me
(a) a bleak, (b) a ball, (c) contagious, or
(d) the lure—
Please discuss, along w/ the effect of the sea
slamming the shore hoarse
& her pink knees pebbled red from the force.

Emma Winsor Wood

The Second Body is a Shield

This poem was composed in 12-point sans serif font while the poet took place
In the past, doomed to remember the world as it took place outside
The detritus of heavy metal music in her mind, orchestrating a school
Of second graders eating sushi on a sidewalk in Park
Slope, in the neighborhood in which she spent the
Summer in heat in a bed in a room overlooking the neighborhood
Drug rehabilitation institute. Unclothed, the first body
Came, touched her skin, and her mind grew
Diseased by its eroticism. Now she carries a dense
Second body in her brain, a second body not unlike
The first, whose material form encompasses every facet of
The world, yet is not the world, and her desire rises and falls, rises and
Pauses and thinks to possess a very fine mind, expertise with regard to
Sex, the fruit of geometric pliability and a knack for crafting dialogue
From everyday speech—should have been a playwright—but the best
Circumstances are never the best.
Literary influences include the former's untamed aggregate, the reality
Of whose experience is formed by combining several disparate parts, then shouting
“You don't know where I'm at?! You don't know where I'm at?!”
Within this faux-fucked 8 ½" x 11"
Static electricity. To which the second body
Responds: “Imagine a pure gold ring. Divide it in half, then keep
Dividing and dividing and dividing.”

Claire Donato

¹⁶⁵ [Claire Donato](#), “[The Second Body is a Shield](#),” in [Aufgabe](#), collected in [The Second Body](#), [Poor Claudia](#)

Boy, Allegorically Deployed

Kiss the past until it's bitter, his
unexplored expanse of skin; cold coinage
of brass nipples kisses his chest tender
to the abrading tongue. He is what snows
in *it is snowing*, precipitating indecision
and a sea of wavering white fields. Sheer
stipulation, verb, the act of being carried
out: bird water where finches drown
of thirst, a glass of axioms, half-full. (See,
we have bodies, and smell like the sea.)
Occasionally anyone.

Ghostly geology,
slag and charnel leaf, slate face
with eroding fossils, this is not
his body: a damaged would-be nobility
disturbs the surfaces of things, even dust
fails me. The most beautiful boy
thinks *beautiful* is too large
and vacant, ripped-open emptiness
on the left margin of argument:
thinks he can't remember whether I
remember no one's there, what he calls
himself. Calls himself *I* at times, and lies
down in a field of broken leaves
and shattered grass.

Himself
on his way to being blazon, eyes ears
lips tongue, full catalogue of cartilage
and muscle and the saline bags
light seeps through. Lies down
and he is Atlas, hands lacking
labels for the lands his hands
land on. We have loved something
and moved on, carnage of pink balls
and buttocks, the world when looked at
properly, a game of names and places
no one's seen. Caress cold breath
until it rains (we've spoken of
the rain already), drown the day.
Then you'll be music too.

Reginald Shepherd

¹⁶⁶ Reginald Shepherd, "[Boy, Allegorically Deployed](#)," collected in [Fata Morgana](#), [University of Pittsburgh](#)

What is Ohio? Who is Mr. Ellington?

I can't remember his face, the deep furrow, his mix tape cassette—
though I know every note was marked with sanctity's odor and secrets.

The sun came out today (ta-dah!) with faint overtures of clarinet.
Grilled skewered beef, six-winged angel billiard hall, roiling heaven scent.

I want in. I want out. In out in out in out: O coquette.
Q: Hello? Mister Fist? A: My first rosette.

The Usage Panel finds *gavel* as a verb, with regret,
unacceptable. The soul creamed, dome of flies, spread out on ice dinette.

He visited me last night. My second bet.
A good bourbon, a crappy hotel room, the leverage of his turbojet.

I joined the trees last night: mean drunks, lashed tongues, slurred threat.
As the drunk angel falls, so a frothy uncorked lament.

Fuck fuck fuck or a polite old-fashioned perfumed sunset.
A polar bear walks into a bar and orders three rounds of arctic melt.

Young soldiers in flimsy coffins. Email subject line: don't forget.
Myrrh, thistle, wings, carbon net.

Please send our regrets, our nimble-stained-fingered public debt.
The heart bitten into a typeface called oubliette.

Thief, cleanse me with your purified sweat.
From the Midwest, CB sends corn casserole, big bands, alphabets.

Catherine Bowman

¹⁶⁷ Catherine Bowman, "[What is Ohio Who is Mr Ellington](#)," in [Harvard Review](#), collected in [Can I Finish, Please?, Four Way Books](#)

Atahualpa

The Inca lets Pizarro stroke his tunic. A crude adventurer in armor, touching
the Offspring Of The Sun Itself.

*I said to him, Inca, of what is a robe as soft as this mayde? He explained
it was from the skins of vampyre bats
that flye at night in Puerto Viejo & Tumbez & which feede upon the natives.
Sacred was the Inca's spittle:*

women of noble families were employed to catch it in a cloth, lest the ground
should not defile it. Later,
the Sun God is garroted, a Dominican priest thrusting a crucifix into his hand
before the noose is tightened. Later,
an Andean mountainside is honeycombed with nitro to blow up & extract its gold.
Later, an oil rig catches fire

in the Gulf outside Biloxi, killing eleven. Later, Phil Spector points a very large
pistol at Dee Dee Ramone & his guitar.
He is producing the album *The End of the Century* & seeks for eight hours
to extract the opening chord
of "Rock and Roll High School." From the mummified head of a rival,
the Inca commanded

a drinking goblet to be fashioned, the refreshment emerging from
a spigot in the mouth.
In "Be My Baby," Spector's storied Wall of Sound is comprised of sleigh-bell,
castanet, full orchestra & the Ronettes
in beehive hairdos, who are less four mixed-race girls from East LA
than noblewomen chosen

to retrieve the Sun God's spit. Take 135. To accessorize his tailored suits, Spector
kept a cache of pistols in the way
that other men keep ties. Bling & Rolex, a ruby-studded coke spoon
swaying his pallid throat.
& in the suburbs this morning a trio of my neighbors armed with handguns
stalk a rabid raccoon,

zigzagging dogwood & azaleas, the neighborhood children in tow, maintaining
respectful distance. From a hedge
the creature darts out; the briefcase man my neighbor aims his pistol.
A froth of blood, a second shot
against the head. Four states south there are plans to ignite five hundred miles
of oil-bespattered water

Even the Inca's table scraps were holy relics & warehoused in camphorwood
trunks. My neighbor pokes the bloated stomach
with a stick. I am coming to believe the Gnostics were right; insatiable &
shameless is the Demiurge,
though ably do we serve Him. The cocked .44 increases not His grandeur,
though a temple-psalm results in the form

of a minor song within the corpus of four pretend-brothers in leather jackets.

Once more we sift the mountain's rubble,
extract the nuggets, golden fillings, the rooms overflowing with valises, shoes &
hair. The face on the goblet will be hewn into a smile.
O Fearsome One, look upon us as we linger by the flowerbeds, making small talk
as the joggers & the mothers

pushing strollers file by. On cable we will view the oil rising miles to a sky
turned blue-black in the fashion of a bruise.
Factotums all, we rise at dawn to creep into the cave where our quarries slumber.
Razor-fanged, blind. The huge ears
tremble at our step, a dainty dish to set before the Firstborn Of The Sun.
We club, we net, we shake them lifeless

in our woolen sacks, careful to leave the pelts undamaged.

David Wojahn

I Try Not To See Myself as a Mother Figure

I imagine Kanye's hand on my stomach
because I've begun to imagine that everyone's
touching me through my clothes.

I was not one for fantasies,
but fantasizing makes me more of a woman.
If I see Kanye's teeth

in my bedroom, if I see him
with the head of a falcon, penis of a buck
(which I've never seen), or

if I see myself in his studio,
in his house, introduced to Jay-Z,
drinking what I can't drink—I am a fool.

I am encouraged to paint myself the fool.
Tattoo of Kanye's head on my hip.
Something to morph.

To humble me. Humiliate me.
If I can only see myself protecting Kanye,
am I even a woman?

Sarah Blake

¹⁶⁹ Sarah Blake, "[I Try Not to See Myself as a Mother Figure](#)," in [Boston Review](#), collected in [Mr. West](#), [Wesleyan](#)

Divine

Oh hell, here's that dark wood again.
You thought you'd gotten through it—
middle of your life, the ogre turned into a mouse
and heart-stopped, the old hag almost done,
monsters hammered down
into their caves, werewolves outrun.
You'd come out of all that, into a field.
There was one man standing in it.
He held out his arms.
Ping went your iHeart
so you took off all your clothes.
Now there were two of you,
or maybe one, mashed back together
like sandwich halves,
oozing mayonnaise.
You lived on grapes and antidepressants
and the occasional small marinated mammal.
You watched the DVDs that dropped
from the DVD tree. Nothing
was forbidden you, so no worries there.
It rained a lot.
You planted some tomatoes.
Something bad had to happen
because no trouble, no story, so
Fuck you, fine, whatever,
here come more black trees
hung with sleeping bats
like ugly Christmas ornaments.
Don't you hate the holidays?
All that giving. All those windup
crèches, those fake silver icicles.
If you had a real one you could skewer
the big cursed heart of your undead love.
Instead you have a silver noodle
with which you must flay yourself.
Denial of pleasure,
death before death,
alone in the woods with a few bats
unfolding their creaky wings.

Kim Addonizio

Dead Year

I crack open a light bulb
for the dead electricity,
the filament I bury
in the yard. Now
nothing gets past
me without first
an obedience test.
My organs twitch
to tell what I
already know: all
years share the same
dread. The egg I
crush with my whole
fist will never be
born or eaten
by anyone. Human
behavior dictates
the time leading
up to here, how
in the morning
the sun screams
itself awake
and some of us
too if we let it.
If I am unclear
it is because I am
gutless. Something
eats through my hope
and leaves a dark
stain. I have no
master plan, no
key to bully
what comes next.
What comes next
could be a miracle
or a threat. I fling
myself through
a series of windows
just to make sure
I am still real.

Anne Cecelia Holmes

¹⁷¹ [Anne Cecelia Holmes](#), "[I crack open a light bulb...](#)" in [Nightblock](#), collected in [Dead Year](#), [Sixth Finch](#)

Believe it or not I Started to Worry

summer's laid out before me
flat as a sweat
palm an inland salt sea & still

I feel hurried
this sense of not-doing
persuades me

I can do even
less my to-do
list's *eat, go*

on a walk,
masturbate at least
once, make

sure to bathe if only
for your
own damn self the body

abstracted
from consequence from
law I try to

smoke weed again
but remember
why I can't I can't

spend hours
piecing together the world
through glimpses

through the bedroom
blinds the
held-breath of sirens in

the distance
my head like a bell
submerged with

the ship in a tidal
pool the tongue
weightless in

the brass in
the mouth the mouth which
opens only to

sing for my own
ear that *gir-hir-hirl*
like a shook chain

you've got an
ass like I've never
seen the shower

pounding the metal
basin once
we had possums living

underneath
the house you could
hear them

scratching below
the tub the
dog lost his mind trying

to get to
them his nose shoved
down

the drain I learned
to forgive
my own instincts their musk and bared

teeth for
repetitive injuries the body
stops sending

relief so a turned ankle
already
turned won't swell what about

my heart my
heart self-sustaining like a male corpse
flower with its

plenary fishoil slick
black
garlic dumpster fire stench

calls carrion
beetles to bathe in the weightless
yellow

Emilia Phillips

¹⁷² [Emilia Phillips](#), "[Believe It or Not I Started to Worry](#)," in [The Shallow Ends](#)

I Passed Three Girls Killing a Goat

I passed three girls killing a goat, shotgun
leaned up against a tree and the entrails
spilling into a coil on the ground. It was hooked
between the tendons of its back legs
to a high branch that gently creaked
like a dry hinge busybody aunties wouldn't oil.
Blood drained into a pail, you could smell it
shifting with the air, and black flies landed
in the shadows of things where the wind
didn't touch. I dreamed I was carrying a sack
filled with animals, and it dragged blood
in the gravel and stained my skirt hem, you could follow my trail
to the county line where old men
sat on the liquor store porch. One crooked his half-arm
for the bottle where the auger had caught his hand.
I dreamed I was in a new country rinsing livers
under a spigot, and the men cracking
black walnuts on a stone named my limbs
like the weather, like none of us knew
the same words. By the tree the girls and the goat
were faltering, one squatted to sharpen
her blackened blade on a strop, and the men
on the county line leaned back on the heels
of their chairs talking about anything, each other,
spring weather, the long-haired boy scalped
by a combine, and one of them swore you only plant
beans with the moon in Capricorn otherwise
the fields choke up with scrub juniper. One
looked intently at his left palm; his right wrist
uselessly brushed the woven seat of his chair.
When a wind came, the screen door leapt up
on its leather hinges which never creaked
and slammed shut. Mud daubers in the muck
by the spigot blew sideways around my ankles and up
under my skirt, and inside I could hear
the woman who lived with the liquor store proprietor
cursing as she locked up the vanilla like she knew
how to break the back of a ghost.

Miriam Bird Greenberg

¹⁷³ [Miriam Bird Greenberg](#), "[I Passed Three Girls Killing a Goat](#)," in [Poetry](#), collected in [In the Volcano's Mouth](#), [University of Pittsburgh](#)

Manic Panic

If you lie still and concentrate, you can forget
your body and float like a balloon to the ceiling

where plaster stars prick like thumbtacks.
So scoured out, you can't feel anything,

like the pink-haired girls who butcher their arms.
Come down. There is no merit badge

for levitation. You can leave your body,
but it will pucker and fall eventually, snagged

in bare branches, which like antennae
receive signals too high-pitched for us to hear.

How sad, everything, and how inexpensive
to say it out loud. The hills smoke

like a motherboard. Feeling bad has never felt
better, think the green-haired girls who brand

the smiles of lighters into their thighs
and wear striped stockings so tight, the stripes distort.

You're not like them. They're still trying to live
the days of Manic Panic and bar marquees

where all the Ls were sevens. How sad, everything,
and how cheap to say it out loud. The hills smoke

like mothers, like purple-haired girls.
Stretched taut, filled with nothing, you rise.

Maggie Smith

¹⁷⁴ [Maggie Smith](#), "[Manic Panic](#)," in [Failbetter](#), collected in [The Well Speaks of Its Own Poison](#), [Tupelo](#)

Varieties of Cool

A friend had a friend who winked us past rope lines,
we were enskyed for one night in hipness

it was boring

the champagne tasted no better than wonderful

the music was the same lobotomy of thump
that had been playing for years as dissent
from our Puritan roots

then we freed ourselves in a cab, something yellow
that wasn't a flower but wanted to be, sang
"Homeward Bound" passably to be happy about melancholy
and teach the driver from Sri Lanka a thing or two
about the American wistfulness for home
all the way to the Brooklyn Bridge
and walked across the night and water
that I got down on my belly and said hello to
through the wooden slats

in Brooklyn Heights we ate grapes and waved
at all the effort by the various Carnegies
and Seagrams to live forever, my friend had a cough
that became an acronym, I sat beside his missing
a man with my missing a woman in front of homes
we knew from movies but appeared less famous
than cozy at four in the morning as we tried
to decide which house wanted to adopt us

I couldn't get over the grapes

he said, *That's New York, you can get anything
as long as it's not what you really need*

he didn't say that

I'm confusing him with Mick Jagger and this poem
with a novel, he said something and I did
back and forth, it was quiet and that's how
conversation works, the grapes were good
and the night air had no idea how bad
his cough would get, I am grateful
that, on balance, the absence of stars
in Manhattan is offset by the number of lights
there's no reason to leave on but people do

Bob Hicok

¹⁷⁵ Bob Hicok, "[Varieties of Cool](#)," in [The New Yorker](#), collected in [Sex & Love & Copper Canyon](#)

What I Heard

She was talking about Akhmatova
and Mandelstam, how there

was only one egg, which she
gave him. But what I heard

was one *ache*: there was one
ache, and they shared it.

Andrea Cohen

¹⁷⁶ [Andrea Cohen](#), "[What I Heard](#)," in [Alaska Quarterly Review](#), collected in [Unfathoming](#), [Four Way Books](#)

from *The Dead Girls Speak in Unison*

Though our sticks are split
we still get eventide
still get lit, night-capped.

Kidnapped, feet wrapped
in the loopy intestine
of your funny little dream.

You think you've found
the sweetest hole—
to bury your craggy face.

The underworld is burning.
Whatevs, little legs.
Make with the running.

Up the sheets like a ladder
each chanteuse gone to heck
will beckon your wreck.

Danielle Pafunda

¹⁷⁷ Danielle Pafunda, "[Though our sticks are split...](#)" collected in [The Dead Girls Speak in Unison](#), [Bloom](#)

from *Diving Makes the Water Deep*

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Cavafy, I sometimes say in a class. A poet of—you know that moment when you are sharing an armrest, very aware of the armrest?

Zach Savich

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¹⁷⁸ [Zach Savich](#), "[Cavafy, I sometimes say in a class...](#)" collected in [Diving Makes the Water Deep](#), [Rescue Press](#)

Blood Ruminant

When one is a child one cannot tell
Calvary from cavalry, the hill
for the horsemen. Each means your death.
Letters are trees.
Behind them something
walks, or struggles. You strain to see
just what sort of beast this is.
Not a nice one, perhaps. Not like
the sleeping kitten,
or the Sunday school lambs.
There may be an army in the forest
and not kind at all.
A nick in the lead-based paint.
Or the soldiers themselves, soft & heavy.
Something walks behind them
and it might be language.
Language, the adults hiss, at the older boys
and girls with their musky scents, some-
times at each other.
As if what is hidden
comes to light, in this forest.
And if the figures be melted down, cast
& sharpened— *Here*
is the church, and here
is the steeple.
The fingers inside blind.
Like the alphabet.
You add eyes—twin pricks—to the
O, to the e. And stand
corrected. Smooth, yes, as a trunk, yes.
As the seam of a soldier.
Will I make a good one, you wonder. Just then,
beyond your range of vision, something
moves. Careful
aim. In the distance a bald hill.
Bare. Someone or something has left it.
A loamy odor, as of shirts
worn by men.
And you hear the baying, no
the neighing of the horses.
The one with the black mane is the one
you like best.
It is a blind horse, but powerful.
It has thrown its rider.
Wounded, he has hidden himself. In the forest.
From which you cannot tear your
error. Or the barrel of your toy musket.
Your own lips moving. By way of

invitation. Or reply.

G.C. Waldrep

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¹⁷⁹ G.C. Waldrep, "[Blood Ruminant](#)," in [New England Review](#), collected in [Disclamor](#), [BOA](#)

a deer with the head of Emily Dickinson

a deer with the head of Emily Dickinson
has been spotted all over town:
hugging the edge of the forest,
standing fog-shrouded in post-midnight
parking lots, up to its knees
in the river's slow swirl.
the thing about the deer
with the head of Emily Dickinson
is that no one has ever seen her move—
she is never seen coming or going,
never leaping across the road
like the hundreds of deer-headed deer
who haunt our forests—
the deer with the head of Emily Dickinson
is always standing there, stone-still
in the middle distance,
for as long as you care to look.

Cassandra de Alba

¹⁸⁰ [Cassandra de Alba](#), "[a deer with the head of Emily Dickinson](#)," in [Flapperhouse](#), collected in [habitats](#), [Horse Less](#)

Instructions for Drowning

You don't believe in salvation, but lie to him anyway
in the Jeep with the fingerprinted windshield,
Route 6 panting beneath you.
Shave your legs while singing,
heel high on the chipped tiles, throat in love
with stones. Don't worry about someone walking in,
what they might see.
Only another body can know a body.
Reed, swamp song, your body
when his hand under your dress, when his breath.
Dandelions, the sticky eyes of yellow grapes.
Consider the sea bottom, how it might
shape itself around your sadness
when his fingers, when no light but fireflies.
Learn the vocabulary of water,
how it is always reaching.

Adriana Cloud

¹⁸¹ [Adriana Cloud](#), "[Instructions for Drowning](#)," collected in [Instructions for Building a Wind Chime](#), [Poetry Society of America](#)

Elegiac Stanzas (with Rhinestones)

Let me tell you how Princess Di died for me.
Here's the news surging across the Atlantic,
gathering force as it sweeps over the Bible belt,
comes hurtling down I-35 on the back of a semi,
slipping through the tinted double doors
on a stolen snatch of sunlight, coming to rest
at the Crystal Palace Gentleman's Club.

I have just offered a well-dressed man a lap dance.
He rebuffs me with a polite, but firm
"No thank you. I'm waiting for Big Tits."
Like he's waiting for the bus.
This is my sixth Diet Coke with extra cherries
and I'm sitting at a little lacquer table
with an engineer who shyly strokes
the black feathers of my open negligee.

But the news: zipping over the carpet's
neon geometry, strobing from stiletto
to stiletto in a crude game of telephone,
until, finally, one of the older girls, Misty,
in a turmoil of mascara, rushes my table,
crushes herself into me and chokes it out:
"Princess Di... she's been... *shot!*"

Look, I can never make it sound right,
or convince anyone this isn't about me,
because however I tell it, there I am
in a San Antonio strip club dressing room,
singularly unaffected amidst the glitter
and wails, while girls I'd never spoken to
held me to their bare breasts
and just sobbed. All the men were left
weirdly alone with their wallets,
and the manager, against his wishes,
had to shut down the Palace and send
his inconsolable princesses home.

Karyna McGlynn

C.O.

in memoriam: Robert Lowell

Cold scrambled eggs. Burnt bacon curling
under his slightly cockeyed glasses.
Opera on the stereo, the bay ice-flat
and gray as a naval deck. The shore
rimy and swirling with snow, gusts
rising up to us, a window rattling
behind his "I can breathe out here."

A Sunday in November, 1969,
the morning after Trinity Square
mounted his Old Glory trilogy.
Bloody Mary toasts, with celery-stick
swizzles, Worcestershire, horseradish,
and fiery talk about the Narragansetts,
and the colonials who were slavers.

To the sunporch beaming with poets
I carry with me a shadowy prosaic:
orders to Vietnam. A green lieutenant,
shave-headed as a monk, I leave tomorrow
and can't fathom Lowell's question about
the Green Bah-rehs, his breath chopping
the word into hardly intelligible halves.

He takes over and pictures the pajama'd
guerrilla flying out the rear hatch
of the helicopter. He asks me
if I have seen this, and he assumes
I know more than I am saying, me
now the dim, lumpen, and enemy soldier
pleading innocence, ignorance, dismay.

It is as if a vacuum has sucked up
the stray talk, and under his affronted
glare I feel like Hawthorne's young Robin
Molineux bewildered by Boston's
mocking, checker-faced hostility.
I too am blistered by the moment,
and can't believe this is happening.

The china clinks, and talk slowly
resumes while I come to, blinking
like a hammered calf. I hardly know
the abbreviation C.O., but a conscience
must be at work when he leans over
and whispers, "Come back. Intact,"
rhyme nearly full, orders fully meant.

Fred Marchant

¹⁸³ [Fred Marchant](#), "[C.O.](#)" collected in [Tipping Point](#), [The Word Works](#)

P.T. Barnum's Fiji Mermaid Exhibition
as I Was Not The Girl I Think I Was

I was a girl, I was one of those Fiji zombie-mermaids, very ugly although I experienced myself as a flickering and silver-finned virgin. People above the water use words like “tease” and when I learned of this word, my feelings were so hurt I refused to be kissed for as long as my longing would allow me to remember this vow, which was six months with only occasional faltering.

When I was a mother I sometimes told my daughter who loves sea creatures little stories before bed and they always began, “When I was a girl and lived in the ocean...”

When I was a wife and a mother and a responsible member of the electorate and was remembering but not telling how I was once a zombie-mermaid girl, senatorial candidates at podiums were describing rapes like twittering invitations until it seemed a thousand-million fluttering rapes had perched on the comments field of the *Huffington Post* chirping the sins of the bitch-teases who got naked in their beds and the bitch-teases who just wanted oral and the bitch-teases who were so drunk nobody could be expected to understand what they were saying.

The one I have been loving and who says he loves me, I thought, I'll ask him about the shock of this “tease” and I'll ask him who the honorable representative from Missouri raped and who the one from Indiana and if 1 in 5 of the women I pass on the street have been raped, how many in 5 of the men I pass on the street have raped and I'll ask him if when I was naked and just wanted oral, did I have it coming and escape on pure luck? and I thought, he'll tell me the air is full of words that are ideas for lies.

So I swam up to him with the glitter of my tail that sometimes I'm afraid he can see is rust flaking the way salmon do sideways at the end of the season, all piled-up in the mouth of their being born, I swam up to him, trying to be winning with my glitter and asked him about how long ago back when I was a mermaid and I did and I didn't and it was sweet and special and nervous and sometimes I would but not predictably and please don't ask. I was telling him the truth of it, the refracted light and blooming anemones of it, the red coral and unfurling starfish of it, but he saw such a cloud of skin-flaked trout over my telling and I could see it too in him saying, “Yeah, you were” and in him saying, “Yeah, you got lucky” and in him saying, “I thought you were over this girlish naiveté” which is when he may as well have said, “If I had raped the tail off you, and I might have, I would not have been wrong, because I hate the demure silver of you and we both know what kind of mermaid you are.”

But we don't both know. Sometimes after we do he looks at me with a face made of waves, as if he really knows me, and now I know I hate that face. It's the most perfectly wrong face and I want to break the barnacle of it. Now I know I never tease because getting off makes a line at the shore of myself and he can try to wash his silking way across it, but I know he is not water and I know it and I know it and I know he is not water, I am water and he is the rake of sand.

Kathryn Nuernberger

¹⁸⁴ Kathryn Nuernberger, “PT Barnum's Fiji Mermaid Exhibition,” in *Green Mountains Review*, collected in *The End of Pink*, BOA

All-purpose Spell for Banishment

A pox on _____ and the gerrymander
he rode in on. Expel, export, exile him
while we waft sage-smoke around.
At this zero hour, as our wombs
contract under the moon, cast him out,
groper / loomer / cheater / harasser / rapist
mogul bully frilled narcissus of a boss.
Evict without visa. Dissolve his assets
and social media accounts. Let there be no
combover strays stranded on sofa-backs,
no insurgent perfume. Erase his name even
from rumor. From amygdala. Remove
all dimples left in moss by cloven loafer.
There is no _____. There never was.
As the last syllable of this incantation
sounds, it dawns on us how light we feel, like
lemon mousse in a silver dish on an early
spring morning before the leaves grow in,
each cell of foam trapping nothing but sugar
and sunshine. On our tongues, only spit.

Lesley Wheeler

Plush Bunny

My poor little future,
you could practically fit in a shoebox
like the one I kept 'pecial bunny in
when I decided I was too old to sleep with her.
I'd put a lid on the box every night.
I knew she couldn't breathe—she was stuffed,
but I thought she'd like the dark, the quiet.
She had eyes, I could see them.
They were two stitches. My future has eyes,
for a while. Then my future has stitches,
like 'pecial's. Then cool cotton, like her guts.
Of course there is another world. But it is not elsewhere.
The eye traps it so where heaven should be
you see shadows. You start to reek.
That's you moving on.

Max Ritvo

Hamlet

You're worthless,
a leafy performance.
Orgasm, wasted on a mirror—
Your fear is

a white skull
atop a red
encyclopedia.
The laughter of the interior

experience, "To Thine Own
Self" etcetera.
Your inked, ornate
script in Old English

like scaffolding
veined near
a wholesome
areola—Sweet

Jailbait, preening at the gym
another year won't
erase it.
You tug your dick and yawn,

trying to maintain.
Nothing,
pageantry. You're empty.
The error's

your self-loathing's
incomplete—
Horror, Flowers, Pleasure.
Black Halls.

You'll live forever. You'll turn
autoimmune.
Bubonic, venereal,
green

moil of the groin. Like
a tree branch
in summer
trying to shake off

summer—
*You'll learn
the songs that
wither.*

Miguel Murphy

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¹⁸⁷ Miguel Murphy, "[Hamlet](#)," in [Blackbird](#)

The orgasm is not sure about the About Me page.

What can she say about herself? That she was once a cello? Well, not a cello exactly, but the notes that emerged? No, not the notes exactly, but the aura of the notes, the small ache they left in the sky like an imprint in blue—though it wasn't a sky exactly, the cloudless space, there, opening and opening inside every woman. (She always did have a preference for women.)

Nin Andrews

It's a Limousine

It is nothing like a shark but the monochrome blanched off-white
of its long body is dumb like a shark's nose and dead eyes and
it is turning a corner.

There's always a child in awe who asks
what is that. And we must supply the information, however
embarrassing our world may be in the explanation.

For

example
this dumb automobile that will make me one day explain Prom,
which made me, personally, throw up in a parking lot. Or wealth.
That one is difficult.

Because the sparkling wide-eyed young ones
all want all the money and candy and most especially baby
kittens
the size of gumdrops that will never grow up.

For them our world
is a cotton candy haze except when you accidentally mention
a dead cat who was named "Peanut." Then the storm appears
on the brow, looms like charred

coffee at the depths of a
cup.

And why shouldn't we give that man bent on the corner money?
(Because we don't have much money, honey.) What's that?
A man who drives a very nice car

and is just about hit you. You must
remind these little dumb-dumbs they are very small, no one can
see them, anyone is liable to run them over, no one cares about
what grade

they're in, they must stop touching everything,
they can't have cake, popcorn, popsicles, cupcakes for breakfast,
lunch or dinner. It's a limousine, and it represents every stupidity
known to human

kind. And you, my child, are never allowed to ride
in one. May they one day become obsolete, may spaceships
replace
them, may you one day cease to force me to answer all of your
questions about this

awful world again. Though by then I may be dead.
And for now I'll take grabbing your hand in mine while crossing
this fearsome parking lot as my one true reason to live.

Cate Marvin

Beat Boxing

That day the dancers started trying
to break but somebody broke
the radio while trying to snatch
a grocery sack from an old lady.
That day the old lady's paper sack
broke under the weight of absent
expectations & dry spaghetti
& Granny Smiths fell apart on
the street like busted explanations
in a British accent: *La Di Da Di*,
we likes to party— That grocery
mess made Garrett laugh so hard
it built a backbeat. That laugh
loaned muscle instead of bringing
the knuckle like a side fist beating
as fat as an apple on a lunchroom
table. A beat that huffed a mad
circle of knuckle-ups. The rappers
rap when the huff coughs up.
The breakers break when
this gruff grumble verses up.
It breathed deep in someone
else's crushing break up & rough
motives where the handclap
should be. That breathing rim
shot the whole cluster
of Kangoled knuckleheads. Empty
grocery sacks between handclaps.
The old lady's wig tilted between
backslaps & laughs. Out of breath,
that beat rested—a loan shark
on Thursday prepping for Friday
payday. Nobody breathed as that beat
made metronomes from breaths.
The old lady went inside to call
the cops & nobody breathed another
beat as the apple bruised to a stop.

Adrian Matejka

Nope

As for yes I've been against it
since ballet & I refused to leap
like a little white flag in the gym
& I refused to skate on blades
if there was ice which there was not
& I refused to ride in the backs of trucks
& did not kill my mother & father
& did not not want to either
& did not wear red bandannas
or gyrate with tassel & baton
in the Jesus parade or go door to door
with The Old Farmer's Almanac
or curl my hair except for that
one blue summer after the 7th grade
or talk with other girls about how
to fix my face or go with them
to the mall to steal bikinis there
or just lean hot against a swanky pillar
until a cowboy came by if "cowboy"
is the right word for southwest Virginia
since there were no priests back then
in the motherland. There's just lichen
now in the motherland. Just lichen
& other forms of algae in the motherland
& vines & moss in the graveyards
of the motherland whereas before
at least in Bristol there was Valleydale Foods
& hence wild gangs of handsome butchers
who'd knock on your door on Sundays
to see if you wanted any hog meat
for the freezer you didn't have in your basement
like the God you didn't have down there either
but just crickets & webs & things gone flat
like the tires on the bikes you didn't ride
& the tubes you didn't float slow
saying yes O yes down that olden river on.

Adrian Blevins

¹⁹¹ Adrian Blevins, "[Nope](#)," in [The Baffler](#)

Lagoon

When I was fifteen, tight and brash in love, I read
the Brontës and the weeklies each night after work
and before you, whose thirst and ribs astounded.

You would be reading something by Bukowski,
something about a woman who maybe fucked
rosebuds and flinched. You brought me a flower

from a package weak with flowers from the fill-station
food mart, but I would not let you put it inside me,
what with my head of voices and dazzled housecalls,

what with the smell of hot dogs and gas all over that rose.
But that isn't possible. No. But is this?
I had chosen you, in brown rooms, in laundries,

chosen you self-sown, best, but do not think of you
often. Still I find myself here, and the voices find me
again recounting splinters. *Is this what you did?*

Yes. I waded in head-smut and sand. You brought me,
bit and dreary, into what you named lagoon
(but was mostly rainwater). Yes I knew better then;

yes I didn't. *Is this what you did?* Meaning: *You did this.*

Lynn Melnick

¹⁹² [Lynn Melnick](#), "[Lagoon](#)," collected in [If I Should Say I Have Hope](#), [Yes Yes](#)

VCR&B

All my favorite singers sound like modems.
I intend this to be read as a loving observation
the same way an aging mechanic lifts the engine
from the torso of his Cutlass Supreme

& sends it off to become someone else's future.
Which is to say, coolly, I know what time it is.
All my favorite singers sample dead legends
& let the spirit speak in HD:

Heathen's Desire, Holy Diffraction—
the only difference worth noting
is whether you want your body
to be something it is not or someplace

it has never been when the synth-laden outro
begins. Whether you do or do not believe
that freaky cyborgs are indeed amongst us
when the bass kicks you upside the knees

like a little brother testing his legs, his luck,
your love. All my favorite singers tend to refrain
from using terms like *love* un-ironically,
which could be read as a way of distancing

what we came here for or what we built
this petulant hunger from. Zapp & Roger
hum *compuuuter luuuuuuv* & I don't
imagine another person on the end

of another screen, blowing emoji kisses at me
from across the distance, but a glowing Xbox
One, my first iPhone, this smooth, black alphabet
full of wires & light, lying to my escapist

heart, daring this flesh to be its own
system of stars & gas giants, unfurl into the slick
ether like so much cellophane, everywhere
& nowhere I have ever wanted to be.

Joshua Bennett

¹⁹³ Joshua Bennett, "VCR&B," in *Blackbird*, collected in *The Sobbing School*, Penguin

Denouement in a Wooden Dollhouse

Attention, Dollhouse, to the sound of stage drapes
furling back and a soft snap
almost like the striking
of a match. That easily you're lit: one lick
and then a flicker at the paisley couch—
the balsa floor lamp blooming like a tulip,
while the chandelier shivers and flares then pops
its glass piñata
to spit firedrops through the room.

Groomdoll, if each chair is cotton stuffing
in a cufflink box—if tissue—then you knew day one
you lived in kindling,
but what else could you do?

The work of dolls
is small-scale drama,
but with no director and no plot, you mostly labored
at the hallway mirror practicing extremes of feeling
on your plastic face. Here's the horror you perfected.

Bridedoll, as a host of crackling yellows
climbs the spiral stairs behind you, something
in your hollow parts is warming toward a climax.
What or who
 have you been miming? How awful much
of you is costume? Singed in your retreat and torn,
your gown has let a little air in,
 and the aria you're always
on the verge of inventing rises in you like a vow that's been inverted.

Attention, Dolls: your immolation's imminent.
Already something's at the door to the master bedroom,
is painting it red, will soon lacquer it black.
I've been so lonely, someone says.
I know,
the other answers. With that, the dialogue stalls.
You touch,
and then you're burning. Somewhere,
past the flimsy panels, you can almost hear applause.

George David Clark

¹⁹⁴ George David Clark, “**Denouement in a Wooden Dollhouse**,” collected in *Reveille*, University of Arkansas Press

Essay on Inheritance

What's half-certain: a father always multiplies and here
he is to teach you long division.
Shit. He's cut off his head.
Did you know he was going to do that?
Here's the doctor! But he's got his eyes
on *you*. He's shining the light in yours. It breaks
like a line does. See,
he understands a poem. He's never doubted
the blood in his body. The funeral
director's come. Gravedigger next.
A father's singular when dead
the way he should be. That
you're sure about. But who
will give the eulogy? Not someone
who erred her whole daughter life, who sits
grateful, alone on the stairs.
Thank the god who banned ghosts. Unfortunately,
you always took after your father—
see, a long time ago the doctor charted
the paths of blood.
But don't trust the doctor!
You have to cut off the head sometime,
so the Hydra proves.
Myth as reinforcement.
You speak with your very own mouth.
With your very own hands.

Elisa Gonzalez

¹⁹⁵ Elisa Gonzalez, "[Essay on Inheritance](#)," in [Hyperallergic](#)

Cosmology

i.

Vermeer's placed us just behind the *Officer's*
shoulder, facing the *Laughing Girl*, a window
open between them, the wall alabaster
in sun, a map dividing morning's glow.

My brother sits across from me, militant
in hunter's camo, chapped, reddened hands
wrapped around a steaming mug, the kitchen
sunrise-bright. His first shot missed, the second

tore the doe's stomach wide. Crimson
in winter woods. My father's telling him to go
to sleep—"It's been two days. She must
be dead"—but he's still picturing snow, how

blood crossed his path like lines of latitude,
how the forest stretched farther than he knew.

Vanessa Stauffer

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¹⁹⁶ [Vanessa Stauffer](#), "[Cosmology](#)," collected in [Cosmology](#), [Dancing Girl](#)

Trevor

Trevor rusted pick-up & no license.

Trevor 15; blue jeans streaked with deer blood.

Trevor too fast & not enough.

Trevor waving his John Deere hat from the driveway as you ride by on your squeaky Schwinn.

Trevor who fingered a freshman girl then tossed her panties in the lake *for fun*.

For summer. For your hands

were wet & Trevor's a name like a truck revving up in the night. Who snuck out to meet a boy like you. Yellow & nearly nothing. Trevor going 60 through his daddy's wheat field. Who jams all his fries into whopper & chews with two feet on the gas. Your eyes closed in the passenger, the wheat a yellow confetti.

Three freckles on his nose.

Three periods to a boy-sentence.

Trevor Burger King over McDonald's cause the smell of smoke on the beef makes it real.

Trevor *I Like sunflowers best. They go so high.*

Trevor with the scar like a comma on his neck, syntax of what next what next what next *Imagine going so high*

and still opening that big.

Trevor loading the shotgun two red shells at a time.

It's kind of like being brave, I think. Like you got this big ol'e head full of seeds & no arms to defend yourself.

His hard lean arms aimed in the rain. When he touches the trigger's black tongue, you swear you can taste his finger in your mouth.

//

Trevor pointing at the one-winged starling spinning in dirt & takes it for something new. Something smoldering like a word. Like a Trevor

who knocked on your window at three in the morning, who you thought was smiling until you saw the blade held over his mouth. *I made this, I made this for you*, he said, the knife suddenly in your hand.

Trevor later

//

on your steps in the grey dawn. His face in his arms. *I don't wanna*, he said. His panting. His shaking hair. The blur of it. *Please tell me I am not*, he said through the sound of his knuckles as he popped them like the word *But But But*. & you take a step back. *Please tell me I am not*, he said, *I am not*

a faggot. Am I? Am I? Are you?

Are you Trevor's eyes: the blue shafts in a gutted mine?

//

Trevor the hunter. Trevor the carnivore, the redneck, not

a pansy, shotgunner, sharpshooter, not fruit or fairy. Trevor the meateater but not

veal. *Never veal. Fuck that, never again* after his daddy told him the story when he was seven, at the table, veal roasted with rosemary. How they were made. How the difference between veal & beef is the children. The veal are the children

of cows, are calves. They are locked in boxes the size of themselves. A body-box, like a coffin, but alive, like a home. The children, the veal, they stand very still because tenderness depends on how little the world touches you. To stay tender, the weight of your life cannot lean on your bones.

We love eatin what's soft, his father said, looking dead

into Trevor's eyes. Trevor who would never eat a child. Trevor the child with the scar on his neck like a comma. A comma you now

//

put your mouth to. That violet hook holding two complete thoughts, two complete bodies without subjects. Only verbs. When you say *Trevor* you mean the action, the pine-stuck thumb on the lighter, the sound of his boots

on the Chevy's red hood. The wet live thing dragged into the truckbed behind him.

Your Trevor. Your brunette but blond-dusted-arms man pulling you into the truck. When you say *Trevor* you mean you are the hunted, a hurt he can't refuse because *that's*

something, baby. That's real.

& you wanted to be real, to be swallowed by what drowns you only to surface, brimming

at the mouth. Which is kissing.

Which is nothing

//

if you forget.

Trevor lying shirtless on the barn rafters. Trevor wearing the WWII Army helmet he bought for \$7 in Wethersfield.

Trevor on his back with his dead mother's radio to his ear, listening, listening.

The field empty of an orchard. The night empty of fathers.

Trevor so still you had to run a finger across his cheek, to make sure.

& he twitches. & it's *fourth down for the Patriots*, says the radio. *With 27 seconds to go.* & Trevor's fists are tight as white rosebuds on the first day of June.

All or nothing says the radio.

His ear, every petal, pressed to the black world. *We got this*, he says.

We got this. & he's looking up at the ceiling, then through it, to the starless sky & you never knew his voice could be this soft, as if he was whispering a secret to a seed still green in the loam.

We got this, he says as dust coats your lungs, sweat in your eyes, Trevor's gaze fixed on a star neither of you sees.

We got this. & you believe him.

//

His tongue in your throat, Trevor speaks for you. He speaks & you flicker, a flashlight going out in his hands so he knocks you in the head to keep the bright on. He turns you this way & that to find his path through the dark woods.

The dark words—

which have limits, like bodies. Like the calf

waiting in his coffin-house. No window—just a slot for oxygen. Pink nose pressed to the autumn night, inhaling. The bleached stench of cut grass, the tarred gravel road, coarse sweetness of leaves in a bonfire, the minutes, the distance, the earthly manure of his mother a field away.

Clover. Sassafras. Douglas fir. Scottish Myrtle.

The boy. The motor oil. The body, it fills as it fills up. But your thirst overflows what holds it. But your ruin, you thought it would nourish him. That he would feast on it & grow into a beast you could hide in.

But every box will be opened in time, in language. The comma

on his neck a border, a break. The line broken, a queering of syntax, of Trevor, who stared too long into your face, saying *Where am I? Where am I?*

Because by then there was blood on your lips.

By then the truck was totaled into a dusked oak, smoke in the wrinkled hood. Trevor, vodka-breathed & skull-thin, said *Stay*. Said *Just stay*

some more as the sun slid deeper into the trees, as the windows reddened in the weak light, *You should stay here*, they reddened like someone trying to see

through shut eyes.

//

Trevor who texted you after two months of silence—

writing *please* instead of *plz*.

Trevor who was running from home. *Who was getting the fuck out*. Soaked Levi's. Eye a burst plum from his daddy's one-arm-lost-in-the-war haymaker. Who ran away to the park because where else when you're 15.

Who you found in the rain, under the metal slide shaped like a hippopotamus. Whose icy boots you took off & covered, one-by-one, each dirt-cold toe, with your mouth. The way your mother used to do when you were small & shivering.

Because he was shivering. Your Trevor. Your all-American beef but no veal. Your John Deere. Green vein in his jaw: stilled lightning you trace with your tongue.

Because he tasted like the river & maybe you were one wing away from sinking.

Because the calf waits in his cage so calmly

to be veal.

Because you remembered

//

& memory is a second chance.

Trevor's head tilted back, dipping into the dream again. Trevor with one good eye searching, searching. Ink-throat opened behind his incisors.

Both of you lying beneath the slide: two commas with no words, at last, to keep you apart. You

who crawled from the wreckage summer like sons leaving their mothers' bodies.

A calf in a box, waiting. A box tighter than a womb. The rain coming down, its hammers on the metal like an engine revving up. The night standing in violet air, a calf

shuffling inside, hoofs soft as erasers, the bell on his neck ringing

& ringing. The shadow of a man growing up to it. The man with his keys, the commas of doors. Your head on Trevor's chest. The calf being lead by a string, how it stops

to inhale, nose pulsing with dizzying sassafras sweetness. Trevor asleep
beside you. Steady breaths. Rain. Warmth welling through his plaid shirt like steam issuing from the
calf's flanks as you listen to the bell
across the star-flooded field, the sound shining
like a knife. The sound buried deep in Trevor's chest
& you listen. That ringing. You listen like an animal
learning how to speak.

Ocean Vuong